



Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat

Wanta

Illustrator: Yunagi





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“Well done! Now,
let’s attack it
together!”

“Yes!”

Together with Adele,
we attacked the lesser earth
dragon with our twin blades:
Adele from the left,
and I from the right.

“I may just see something wonderful before I die.”



Kevin

The butler who has served House Cirard for a generation. He is a veteran who has seen countless battlefields. In the game, he also betrays Jack around the middle of the story.

“How about working together?”



“He is like a different person. I do not know how else to put it.”



Lumié

Jack's personal maid. In the game, she betrays him around the middle of the story.

“I shall protect Master Jack no matter what!”



Seravim

The hero. If she notices Jack in the game, it means certain death—earning her the name of Grim Reaper.

Adele

A beastfolk who uses twin swords and serves Jack. In the game, she is the strongest supporting character.

Jack

Baron of House Cirard. The protagonist of the fangame Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat. He remembers his previous life and how he once was a player.



“I'm definitely gonna survive and live a life of luxury.”

Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat
Characters



Survival Strategies

of a Corrupt Aristocrat

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Prologue: Taking over House Girard

My name is Jack Girard, and my soldiers were lined up in a spacious grassland. Their plate armor reflected the sunlight, their one-handed swords hung at their hips, and their steel helmets covered their faces. They were motionless, looking like they weren't even breathing—they seemed more like dolls than people.

"P-Please, help me!" a bald middle-aged man begged. He was on his knees sobbing before the soldiers, his arms and legs bound. The way liquid wouldn't stop seeping from his eyes and nose was disgusting.

I walked toward him, holding a two-handed sword and carrying a shield painted with the crest of a flower and poisonous snake on my back.

"Shut up," I ordered, my voice dripping with irritation. He stopped blubbering immediately.

I came today as the current lord of the Girard territory to punish a criminal. I planned to deal with the man after reporting the charges against him. "I heard you used my name to do as you pleased."

Though it was quite sad to admit, my territory was poor. Until recently, the population had been suffering because of heavy taxation, so they didn't have enough food and more and more women had been selling their bodies. And yet, the man before me had been merrily eating and having his way with those women without paying a cent.

Moreover, of all things, he'd used my name to do it. Because of that, my reputation was on the decline. That was a serious betrayal, one that should never be forgiven.

"The previous lord gave me his permission!" he explained.

And here I was wondering what kind of excuse he would give. To think he would use my father as a pretext, even though I'd stolen the position from the man myself.

He's such a pathetic lout, relying on someone else when he's cornered.

“So you don’t need mine?” I took a step forward to put pressure on him. His teeth chattered as he trembled. “Who’s the current lord?”

“You, Lord Jack.”

“Exactly. And you didn’t ask for *my* permission.”

The man shut his mouth, not giving any further excuses. Taking it as a chance to release the stress I had been accumulating, I continued to report his crimes.

“You also stole some of the money we’re storing in the mansion.”

“That’s—”

“Who gave you the right to speak?!” I yelled, thrusting the tip of my blade before him.

He swallowed.

“I already checked the flow of the money,” I continued. “Even if you deny it, nothing will change.”

I raised my sword above my head. This scum wasted the precious money I was saving up to live in luxury. Throwing him in jail would be too lenient; he needed to atone with his life. It’d also help to restore my honor.

“I’m not the only one who embezzled money! There’s also—” He tried to argue, but I swung my sword before he could finish. The thick blade decapitated him in one stroke, and blood gushed forth, dyeing the grassland in red.

“I already took care of the others. You were the last one.”

There had been a man who’d kidnapped and sold people from this fief to another and a tax collector who himself had a long history of tax evasion, but I’d already dealt with them. The bald man before me was the last one.

Man, it feels good to take care of traitors. Glad I did it, I thought as I threw my sword to the side. It planted itself upright into the ground.

“I leave the cleanup to you,” I directed the soldiers who had watched the execution, and left without waiting for an answer.

After a little walking, I arrived at a carriage. It was connected to two horses, and the coachman was holding their reins. An old man stood near him—my

butler, Kevin. He was an irreplaceable retainer, as well as the man who would betray me one day.

“Did you finish your business?” he asked me with a tone that implied I should leave such things to the soldiers.

The execution was a performance to show my subordinates that I would never forgive traitors, but it didn’t seem like he understood that.

Well, it’s a pain to explain, so whatever.

“Yeah. Let’s go back.”

“Certainly.” Kevin bowed and opened the carriage’s door. Apparently, he *was* aware he was my vassal.

Once I quietly boarded, he closed the door, and I was locked in silence. The carriage immediately started to move.

The road hadn’t been paved, so the coach rattled as it violently shook around. Anyone prone to car sickness would certainly feel it here.

Having nothing else to do, I peered outside and could make out my mansion and a small town in the distance.

No matter how many times I see them, it just feels wrong to see buildings made of bricks.

Other than my memories as Jack Girard, I also had ones as a man living in Japan. In those memories, skyscrapers, cars, games, and such existed. It was a world ruled by science, and I missed it—but at the same time, I didn’t wish to return to the life I’d had, full of despair after being betrayed by my dearest wife.

I wanted to live in this world, even forgetting the convenience of my old one, and experience something I couldn’t in my past life: living in luxury.

Thinking about the past made me want to check the small notebook in my pocket, so I took it out. Inside was important information I needed to survive in this world. You could even say it was my lifeline.

The first line simply read “Notes on *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*.”

It was the title of the game I had played until just before my death.

* * *

My wife cheated on me, so we divorced. We had a child, but she was the one to get custody. She kept the house we had bought together, and I ended up moving into a small studio.

I didn't feel like working anymore after losing everything, so I quit my job and spent my days absorbed in games until I passed out. However, I quickly lost interest. As regulations were becoming more and more strict, official games were becoming less and less fun. Same for manga and novels—they were all bland.

The only thing that kept me from despairing over the fact that even my hobbies weren't fun anymore was fangames. Creators could write whatever stories they wanted in these, and it was plenty enough to immerse myself in them and forget about my unpleasant reality.

In particular, I loved *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. It had you play as a corrupt noble who had to squeeze out money from the people of his fief without killing them, which was quite difficult. If you were too hard on them, the villages perished, but if you weren't strict enough, an insurrection would happen. What's more, there were also epidemics, invasions from other countries, and the hero who punished evil aristocrats, as well as many other outrageous events that were only possible because it was a fangame.

Anyway, it was really difficult to clear, and that's why I was so into it—to the point I even filled an entire notebook with information about the game.

Moreover, I also empathized with the protagonist, Jack.

Born as the son of a countryside baron, he was gifted in the literary and military arts as well as magic, which was unfortunately a bad thing for him. Indeed, his talent bought the hatred of his parents, and they tried to assassinate him. He somehow managed to survive and reach his fiancée's house, only to find her cheating on him with another man. And, as if that weren't enough, his longest-serving retainers also cruelly betrayed him.

After losing everything, Jack answered with violence. He executed his fiancée

and had his parents killed by his private army.

When I watched these scenes, even as apathetic as I had become, it felt quite good. That might have been because I saw myself in Jack.

“Argh!” I groaned in pain.

Suddenly, after playing four days in a row without sleep, my chest started to hurt. Even though Jack was on the verge of ruling over the country, I didn’t feel like I was going to make it.

My breath grew fainter and my consciousness was fading. I couldn’t see or hear anything anymore.

Am I...dying? But I wanted to see Jack, the man who’d lost everything, take over his country...

“Young Master! Please wake up!” I heard a voice even though I shouldn’t have been able to hear. Even though I shouldn’t have been able to see, I saw a woman who, for some reason, was looking anxiously at me.

For a goddess of death, she was quite the looker. Maybe I was hallucinating because I was so terrified of dying?

“What to do... If he dies, the master will kill me,” she said, bursting into tears with her head on my body.

She’s a little heavy... Wait, I can feel her! That means I’m still alive!

I tried to put strength in my fingers and, sure enough, they moved. I even successfully sat up.

“Where...am I?” I muttered, but I didn’t recognize my own voice.

I was on a huge bed with a canopy that was far too big to fit inside my studio. Or rather, I had no memory of ever having bought a bed.

“Young Master... You’re alive?” The woman who had been crying with her head on my stomach looked at me in shock.

I remembered her face and beautiful blonde hair: Lumié, a character from *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. She was Jack’s personal maid and, though she was quite devoted to him at the beginning of the game, would leave

him around the midgame and join the side of an enemy lord during the endgame.

Considering she could also become his mistress depending on the route you take, she hit all the buttons of my traumas and I hated her.

“I have to tell the madam.”

“Wait!” I called out to her as she stood up. I couldn’t let myself stay in such an incomprehensible situation. I had to quickly figure out what was happening. “Say my name.”

“Huh? Master Jack...?” she answered, confused.

I did have my doubts, but it seemed like I really did become the protagonist of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. No, I had memories of my childhood as Jack, so it might be more apt to say that I *was* him in the first place, and that the memories of living in Japan were more like a dream or delusion.

“Why did I collapse?”

“As you were having your breakfast, you took a sip of your black tea and suddenly spat it out. Then you grabbed your chest before losing consciousness,” she replied. “The house’s doctor examined you, then said to let you rest in your bed.”

A poisoning attempt, huh? I remember that event.

My parents, who found me to be a nuisance, had tried to assassinate me. In the game, the culprit was a mystery—ditto for the many attempts that followed it. With my new memories, however, I knew exactly who was responsible, and I wasn’t going to wait around doing nothing.

“*Kill them before they kill you,*” my heart appealed to me.

I wasn’t sure if this world was exactly the same as the game, but I couldn’t ignore the fact that my parents had tried to kill me. When I was in Japan, I had a strong aversion to murder. But now? Not at all. Quite the contrary, I felt like it was the most efficient way to take care of the problem.

I guess my thought process is closer to Jack’s.

“I’ll tell them. You stay here,” I ordered Lumié and got off the bed. I felt a little

giddy but I felt fine enough.

“Young Master?! You need to rest!”

I pushed the flustered Lumié aside and firmly walked out of my bedroom. When I looked outside, it was dark, so it must have been night.

I went through the corridor full of extravagant vases, paintings, and other furniture bought with the money squeezed out of the population of our territory. I made a detour by the trash disposal area, then arrived in front of my parents’ bedroom.

I entered without knocking.

Two fat ugly pigs—sorry, I meant my parents—were sitting on the sofa, drinking wine. They must have been quite drunk as their faces were flushed.

A maid stood to the side with a mountain of baked sweets atop a large plate. There was no way that could all be eaten tonight, so the leftovers would be thrown away. Apparently, the more that’s dumped, the better. It was a truly incomprehensible culture.

“Good evening,” I said in greeting.

My parents stiffened, their lips on their wine glasses.

Well, no wonder. After all, their poisoned and presumably comatose son was standing before them with a smile. I knew how they felt. It must have been like seeing a ghost.

“You’re fine already? I was worried!” My father stood in a hurry, causing wine to spill from his glass and soil his clothes.

Man, you really have no shame. It’s your fault I almost died.

“Yes. I woke up, so I decided to inform you of my recovery.” I smiled, hiding my hostility. Such a performance was nothing difficult for Jack, who had received a noble education. “Since I’m here, I want to drink too. Get me a glass,” I ordered the maid.

She hesitated for a second, but after my father told her to go, she bowed and left the room. She wouldn’t return for a while, so I had to end everything before then.

I silently walked up to my parents. “Incidentally, did you not meet someone from the Welza Company yesterday?”

Even though I’d suddenly asked something completely unrelated to the topic at hand, my parents were too afraid of me to point it out.

“Y-Yeah, we did. Was there something you wanted?” my father asked.

“No, I have everything I need, thank you. What did you buy, Father?”

“Nothing a child like you needs to know about.”

Well, yeah, of course he wouldn’t tell me. The Welza Company officially sold potions made by alchemists, but they also dealt in poisonous substances behind the scenes.

“I see. And here I thought you had bought this,” I said as I took a violet bottle from my pocket and showed it to them.

It was still half-full of liquid. They had thrown away the bottle with the remainder of the poison. It was quite sloppy of them, but considering that nobody would have looked for it if I hadn’t woken up, they hadn’t bothered to do more.

These guys really make tons of slipups, I mocked them in my head.

“Wh-Why do you have that?!” my father shouted.

“This is a poison potent enough to make someone faint with just a few drops, no?” I asked as I took a step forward.

My parents’ faces scrunched up in fear.

I took another step closer, and they tried to run away.

“Shadow Bind.”

With magic I caused my shadow to stretch forward, thinning as it grabbed my parents’ ankles before crawling up their bodies, pinning their legs and arms, and even gagging their mouths.

In the game, Jack’s forte was the darkness attribute. Considering how it seemed to be the same for this body too, it was even more likely that this world was the same as the world of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*.

“How sad for you to flee when your beloved son approaches you.”

I pushed down on my father’s shoulders and made him sit on the sofa. My mother was crying, trying to say something, but she couldn’t move her mouth enough to form words. What a shame. If I knew pig language, maybe I could have understood her—but unfortunately, I was human.

“What cruel parents you are, poisoning your son because you are scared of him.”

I opened the bottle and seized my father’s head before I forcibly opened his eyes and spilled a few drops on them.

“Nmmmh!” he groaned in pain. Then, after struggling for a few seconds, he lost consciousness.

He wasn’t dead. He was sleeping. In this world, there was a strange disease that made people fall into a coma, so I could use it as an excuse to deal with them. I was only doing to them what they did to me, so I felt no pangs of conscience.

I’d punish the betrayers. I couldn’t do it in Japan, but since Jack was a powerful and influential person, it was possible here. I could do as I wanted.

“You are next, Mother.”

I spilled a few drops in her eyes as well and, just like my father, she struggled for a few seconds before losing consciousness.

Then I emptied the bottle in their mouths. After that I tried to make them drink wine, but they spat it out on the sofa.

I put the bottle back in my pocket, took a deep breath, and yelled, “Father! Mother! What has happened to you?! Wake up!” I stopped using magic and shook their bodies. I even made myself cry.

The door burst open.

“Is there a problem?!” It was the maid who had gone to get a glass for me. She looked at my parents, flustered. “Master! Madam!” she called, but they didn’t wake up.

Of course they wouldn’t. It was a strong poison, impossible to heal. The only

reason I was fine was because I'd noticed a strange taste to my tea and immediately spat it out. On the other hand, with all I'd had them drink, my parents would most likely sleep forever.

Realizing that no matter how much she tried they wouldn't wake up, the maid turned toward me. "What happened, Young Master?"

"I don't know. They collapsed suddenly as we were talking. Call the doctor!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

As I watched the maid run, almost tumbling over herself, I felt that my takeover of House Girard was going smoothly.

Chapter 1: Adele of the Twin Swords

Two months have passed since my parents fell into a coma.

Just as planned, it was considered an illness and, as I was an only child, the royal family gave me permission to succeed my father and become the next baron. If I had been a minor, a relative could have claimed the position; fortunately, I had already come of age. Everything went smoothly to the point it was almost anticlimactic.

With this, I had become the sixth head of House Girard and the ruler of my own lands. I'd have loved to indulge myself in luxury every day like my parents did, but first I had to confirm that it would be possible to maintain that lifestyle. As such, I was currently reading through past reports in the office, understanding them thanks to the knowledge and experience Jack had amassed in his childhood.

"Wh-What the hell are these numbers...?" I muttered, my hands shaking.

This revenue record was truly shocking. We snatched ninety percent of the crops from the farmers. Moreover, for merchants, taxes were based on the amount they sold, not their profit. And that wasn't all: there were poll taxes, land rents, taxes for dying, taxes for marrying, a toll for entering and exiting the territory, and so on and so forth. Basically, if something could be taxed, it was. Considering that people also needed to give ten percent of their income to the Church, I couldn't imagine they were able to live a proper life.

The hell is wrong with Jack's parents?! How could they think that... Wait, no. They didn't think at all, and that's how it ended up like this. If they actually had tried to earn profit from the people by barely letting them survive, everyone would already be dead.

At this rate, it wouldn't take long for an insurrection to happen. Or maybe the territory would fall to ruins before that. Either way, if I continued down this road I was heading straight for a Game Over! In the worst case, the dreadful hero would come under the pretense of world reformation to take care of me.

If I don't improve the situation I'll never be able to live in luxury!

“Go call Kevin!” I ordered Lumié, who was waiting behind me. She quickly exited the office.

Even now that I had become the head of House Girard, I still kept her as my personal maid. The reason was pretty simple: I didn’t trust the other maids. Aside from Lumié, the rest had all been serving my parents, so they might dislike me, or else try to take advantage of me.

I’ll never allow that! My wealth is mine.

As for Lumié, while she was going to betray me one day, I knew that until then she would devote herself to me. I was still at the very beginning, if I were using the game as a reference point. Thanks to sending my parents into a coma, I got to start managing the territory earlier, giving me more time. I had to use that extra time to build myself a firm position.

“You called, Young Master?” An elderly man with conspicuously white hair parted to the side entered the office. Though advanced in age, he continued to train his body and it showed in his steady gait. He was the butler in charge of the mansion, Kevin. He was the reason my parents could ignore government affairs and live as freely as they had—he was the one doing everything.

“You shouldn’t call me that anymore. I’m the head of the family now.”

“Then what should I call you?”

“In formal situations, Girard. Other than that, just use my name.”

“Understood, Master Jack.” He bowed deeply.

I’m sure you called me Young Master again just to test me, you brazen old man.

Just like Lumié, Kevin left Jack around the middle of the game. As such, I wanted to decapitate him right now, but as he knew everything about the territory’s management, killing him would make things worse. I had to be patient.

Kevin raised his head and walked to the center of the room with Lumié following behind him. “So, what did you call me for, Master Jack?”

“What do you think about the tax yields?”

“Hmm... I only did as I was told. I am not someone who would question his master’s orders.”

Tch. What a flawless answer.

He’d basically proclaimed that he was a faithful servant who obeyed any orders. There was no way I could fault him for his loyalty.

He looked straight at me. In his eyes, I could see the reflection of Jack and his nasty glare.

“Well then, I have a job for you, Kevin—competent servant that you are.”

Kevin and Lumié stiffened. I was pretty sure they were bemoaning the fact that I was about to make their lives more of a pain by giving them unnecessary work. Unfortunately for them, I was the only one who could have it easy in this house.

I’ll have you do all the work for me.

“We’re changing the tax system. Lower the farmers’ rate to sixty percent. For the merchants, we won’t collect from the amount they sold anymore, but from their profit. Amend it to be effective starting this year.”

Kevin, whom I thought was a capable man, was speechless, his mouth agape.

You should answer immediately! Damn it, don’t look down on me just because I’m the new head!

“Also, abolish the taxes on marriage and death.”

If they didn’t marry, the population wouldn’t increase, and if they had to pay money when they were mourning someone’s death, they would resent me. That meant both these taxes were useless to me.

“Abolish them...?” he muttered skeptically.

“What, you have an objection, Kevin?”

He had proclaimed that he was a faithful servant who obeyed any orders just a while ago. He couldn’t complain.

“N-No, of course not!”

“Then do it immediately. Announce it to the people too.”

It would be a bad joke if the people revolted because they failed to notice that they paid fewer taxes. I needed to have them know that I did something good for them.

“I am your humble servant. I shall do my best to accomplish your command.” He bowed deeply and turned back to leave the room, but I stopped him.

“Wait, one more thing.”

He slowly turned toward me with an anxious expression.

“Sell all the tasteless paintings, vases, and other artworks in the mansion. Ten percent of the earnings will be distributed to all the people working here, so no slacking.”

“Huh...?” he blurted, dumbfounded.

I was an amateur and could be deceived by merchants, so I asked Kevin instead. Since I didn’t trust any of them, I prepared a reward based on his results as well. It’d be a real pain if he didn’t take this seriously.

“I’m done. Now, go!” I ordered.

“C-Certainly!” he replied and left the office.

Meanwhile, Lumié just stared at me.

This is awkward...

“I’m thirsty. Bring me tea.”

She silently bowed and exited the room. It looked like she was thinking about something. Maybe about when to betray me? In any case, my life was on the line, so I needed to remember when she would turn on me. I figured I should take notes before my memories started to fade.

I took a few pieces of parchment and started to write all the information on the game I could remember. Thankfully, my memories of Japan were still vivid and my pen practically moved on its own. It should only take me a few hours to note everything.

“Here is your black tea,” Lumié announced, having returned.

“Put it on the desk,” I said without thanking her. Being an aristocrat allowed

me to have such an arrogant attitude.

Lumié did as I told her to, took a few steps away, then stared at me again.

I ignored her and continued to write. Once done, I did a final check. I needed to be very careful about any events that could cause an insurrection or people who could become my allies, so any omission would be fatal.

The one I should meet ASAP is... Wait, what's the current date?!

"What's the exact date on the royal calendar today?"

"It is the 3rd day of August in the 647th year of the royal calendar."

My blood instantly ran cold—I had to go immediately. I put the bundle of parchments in my chest pocket and stood up.

"What is it, Master Jack?" Lumié asked.

"I'm going out."

"Huh? Now?"

"I need to help *her* as fast as possible," I muttered.

In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, the strongest ally was an adventurer named Adele. She was a woman with a particularly strong sense of duty, so if Jack saved her, she would follow him no matter his misdeeds. She was such a strong and important character that people—myself included—thought that the game was impossible to clear without her. Making her my ally was my highest priority.

"I probably won't be home for the next two days, so tell Kevin I leave everything to him and he must deal with the tax system quickly."

I didn't want to rely on others, but I was only one person. Though I'd need to carefully confirm that he hadn't betrayed me once I returned, I could only entrust things to him for now.

I hurriedly left the office and went to my bedroom. I put on a breastplate, gauntlets, and boots—all in mithril—and took a sturdy one-handed adamantite sword.

"Young Ma... Master Jack, what are you doing?" asked Lumié, who had

followed behind me like a guardian spirit. I didn't intend to tell her the truth. If I told her I was going to save Adele in a battle against monsters, she would doubt my sanity. She might even judge that she couldn't keep serving a master that crazy in the head.

As such, I lied. "Numbers aren't enough to understand everything. I'm going to see the territory with my own eyes."

Lumié made a stupid expression, her mouth wide open.



It's unfair how pretty she is even when making a face like that. Even though she's gonna betray me in the future... Somewhat irritated, I flicked a baked sweet on the table and splendidly landed it in her mouth.

"We're going to be busy from now on. You can eat all the pastries here, so replenish the sugar in your body."

It seemed she choked on it a little, but considering it was my way of harassing her, it was just as I wanted. I was in a hurry, so I ignored her protesting eyes.

Yeah, I didn't have time. After all, Adele would die tomorrow if I did nothing.

* * *

Young Ma...no, Master Jack mounted a horse and set out on his own.

When I told him he had to take guards with him, he high-handedly refused, saying there was nothing to fear. Just what has happened to him? He used to be so arrogant, and only knew how to spend money. I felt like he changed after collapsing that day.

"Lumié, where is Master Jack?" Kevin asked from behind me as I stood at the entrance.

"He went out saying he wanted to see the territory."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

Kevin fell silent. Maybe he was going to scold me for letting our master go alone? Or maybe he was going to order me to immediately send guards after him?

As I was wondering what he'd say...

"What do you think of Master Jack?"

The question certainly wasn't just about today, but about everything he'd done since he'd awakened that day.

"He is like a different person. I do not know how else to put it."

As his personal maid since he was a child, I could say it rather confidently.

After all, Master Jack was a selfish womanizer who couldn't trust anyone, but he suddenly became a decent person. Though he was a little brusque about it, he had given me a pastry. He never did that before—he was the kind of person who preferred to keep everything to himself.

He'd shared something with someone else. If he's able to show consideration to others now, that would be a definite improvement.

"So you think the same?"

"What about you, Sir Kevin?"

"Hmm... Let's just say that I see him as the hope of the declining House Girard."

Kevin's family had been serving House Girard since it was founded. It was thanks to the fact that both families had a close relationship that Kevin could speak that harshly to our lord, and not only have influence over the other servants but also House Girard itself. He was also the one in charge of the instruction of the previous lord, and I heard that when Kevin was truly angry, the lord would shake like a leaf.

I wish I could have seen that.

"I may just see something wonderful before I die," he suddenly said with a truly delighted smile. It was a huge contrast to the bitter expression he normally wore. "What will you do?"

To tell the truth, I had planned to persuade my little brother working as a soldier to leave House Girard and go serve another noble. I couldn't bear to look at the poor people in the domain suffering anymore.

However, my feelings had changed. I'd watched over Master Jack since he was a boy—and now I wanted to see what he would do to make the people happy.

"I am staying, of course. I will continue to serve Master Jack."

"Understood," Kevin said, and he promptly left.

A little after that, three soldiers on horses hurried out of the mansion. One of them was my little brother. Most likely, Kevin had ordered them to search for

Master Jack.

* * *

On my horse, I headed for a place named Third Village. It was a tranquil farm village with a little over one hundred inhabitants. However, right now, it should be getting assaulted by monsters—monitor lizards. And there, Adele, who just happened to be passing by, should be fighting to help the surviving villagers.

Naturally, being the strongest supporting character in the game, Adele was able to deal with monitor lizards even if there were dozens of them. However, the humanoid lizard leading them, known as a “lizardman,” was going to use the villagers as hostages and capture her. And, worst of all, lizardmen loved to torture people from other races.

As such, if it happened like in the game’s side quest, Adele was going to be tormented to death and pass away the next day. Of course, her death didn’t mean it’d be Game Over. However, while you could continue to play, without her you wouldn’t have enough fighting power to defend against assassination attempts, assaults on the road, invasions from other territories, and other battle events, so Jack would die numerous times. In the game, you could save and load, but this was reality. I couldn’t just let myself die without a care.

There was no way I’d accept such a fate, so I needed to have Adele, the strongest spear and shield, to feel indebted to me and become my comrade. That way, it would be fairly unlikely for her to betray me.

“Master Girard!” a voice called my name. I wasn’t wearing something a noble would, but my identity was discovered nonetheless.

I stopped my horse and looked behind me. The three soldiers who had been guarding the mansion today approached me. Most likely, Kevin had sent them after noticing I went out alone.

“Why are you here? Go back to the mansion!” I shouted.

“W-We can’t! If we do, Sir Kevin will kill us!” one of them—a young man around fifteen—cried.

The two behind him nodded in agreement. Kevin had a big influence on not only the maids, but the soldiers too. They were more scared of him than me,

their new master.

I studied them. Their equipment was poor and they would be considered level 1 soldiers if we were in the game. They were the kind of units that died every battle but could easily be replenished, so I used them as sacrificial pawns.

Unlike Adele, it wouldn't be a big deal if they died. However, I'd just taken over the territory and new recruits were precious. After all, unlike in the game, it took time to conscript new soldiers. Moreover, we currently didn't have much money, so their deaths would put pressure on our finances.

"I'm going somewhere with monitor lizards and a lizardman. You'd only be heading toward your deaths. It's not too late—go back."

"Then you should return with us, Master Girard! That would solve the problem!"

If I could do that, I wouldn't have gone in the first place!

I couldn't tell them I was on my way to save Adele, so I gave them a random explanation. "As the lord of these lands, I can't leave as my people are being assaulted by monsters."

Since they didn't know my true thoughts, their eyes sparkled with admiration. I looked like the perfect feudal lord.

"Then I can't let you go alone, Master Girard!" one of them said, and the other two agreed.

So it's the "going together route," huh? Well, I made a good impression, so they shouldn't betray me. I can't waste any more time, so I should compromise and let them come with me.

"Fine. You can come. But you'll have to listen to any order I give, unconditionally."

"Yes, milord!" the three answered together.

We wasted enough time. Let's go.

I kicked my horse to make it gallop. After advancing for a while, the first soldier who had spoken to me approached.

“How did you notice the monster attack, Master Girard?”

“A report had mentions of people seeing monitor lizards and a lizardman.”

“That’s all?”

“The report is from last week. Lizardmen tend to meticulously prepare before attacking humans, so I predicted the assault would occur around now.”

“Incredible, Master Girard! You’re so knowledgeable!”

He gives me lip service, but I wonder what he’s really thinking?

Anyway, I didn’t reply as our horses continued to run. Then, finally, the village entered my sight. We stopped on a small hill from where we could see it entirely.

As I expected, the village was being assaulted by gray monitor lizards that were destroying the buildings. The villagers were taking shelter in the church and the monsters were charging at its walls. They weren’t smart enough to think of breaking the door to enter and only thought about the food they smelled inside the building.

“Master Girard... Wh-What should we do?”

“Shut up and watch. The situation should change soon.”

“Huh? We’re not going to save them?”

I ignored him and stared at the church until, suddenly, a woman appeared.

She had long crimson hair, dog ears on her head, and a bushy tail. She belonged to the race of humans with animalistic traits—the beastfolk—and her name was Adele. Beastfolk were stronger than humans and could use mana to strengthen themselves even more, so they were extremely powerful at close combat.

She might be petite and look like a child, but she slaughtered one monitor lizard after another using her twin swords that were the same blazing crimson as her hair.

“She’s strong...” the soldier next to me blurted, astonished.

We’re still at the start of the game. Adele will become far stronger than that,

you know?

As I was thinking, Adele finished killing all the monsters that were attacking the church and went after the ones scavenging the destroyed houses. She defeated them without any problems for now, but she would soon be in a predicament.

“She might win!” the soldier rejoiced, but his excitement would prove short-lived.

After all, I caught sight of the lizardman circling around the back of the church. Normally, Adele would have noticed him, but she was too busy protecting the villagers and failed to keep her guard up.

As a result, *this* happened.

The lizardman broke the wooden door of the church and entered, took a child, then stood before Adele.

“If you, move—I, kill.”

Of course, I didn’t hear him directly, far away as I was. But remembering his dialogue from the game, I knew he had threatened her like that. After that, in exchange for having the villagers released, Adele was going to throw down her weapons and surrender. Then the lizardman would abduct her.

Naturally, monsters didn’t respect their promises. The remaining monitor lizards would devour all the inhabitants.

As for Adele, who was going to be restrained in their nest, she would learn the truth while being tortured and die resenting the lizardmen.

And if you thought that was revolting, what came after was even worse. After her death, her body would be *used* by the lizardmen’s goblin subordinates.

Goblins were small hook-nosed monsters as tall as children with green skin that loved humanoid women—in a sexual way, of course. And even a corpse was enough for them to enjoy themselves. They would play with her body for days as it decayed, even after her eyes fell from their sockets, until Jack would discover it.

That was what would happen if Adele was defeated. Also, for some reason,

there was even a grotesque illustration of the discovery scene.

I really can't understand the creator's tastes and why he put so much effort into the bad endings.

"What should we do?" the soldier asked.

Of course, we were going to save her. The main reason was that I wanted to obtain the strongest character as my ally, but I also hated the fact that she was fated to die betrayed.

"Kill the traitor," I said in a tone so low I even surprised myself.

"...Master Jack?" The soldiers were perplexed as my reply didn't seem to answer their question.

I didn't expect anything from them in terms of fighting potential, so I ignored them. If they couldn't follow after me, it would prove that was all they amounted to.

"Shadow Walk."

I used a spell that allowed me to move inside shadows. Ever since I took over Jack's body I've been able to use magic, but honestly, I didn't understand how it worked. I was pretty sure even the game's creator didn't really think about it, and just gave magic that used darkness and shadows to the protagonist because said protagonist was evil.

Anyway, I sank into my shadow and emerged from one belonging to the building behind the lizardman. Adele noticed me, so I raised my index finger to my lips to tell her to stay silent.

"Throw, weapons," the lizardman ordered, certain of his superiority. The lizardmen's language was close to ours so we could communicate, though their speech was broken and hard to understand.

As long as the lizardman was holding the child I couldn't use magic, so I decided to wait a little.

"In exchange, you have to let the kid and the other villagers go," Adele said.

"Got, it. Promise."

She didn't believe him, but with no other choice, she abided and threw her twin swords to the side, their blades stabbed into the ground. Then she raised her hands to show that she wouldn't resist.

"Let the kid go."

"No. Bind you, first."

"Tie my hands with this," Adele said while she took two thin strings from the pouch at her hip and threw them on the ground. They were made with thread woven by monsters called giant spiders, and were sturdier than they looked.

"Fine." The lizardman put the child on the ground and whistled to call a nearby monitor lizard. "If you, resist, he, kills."

The lizardman left the kid to the monitor lizard and took careful steps toward Adele. The child meanwhile started to cry, afraid of being eaten.

"Shadow Bind." I took the chance to use magic.

My shadow stretched and bound the monitor lizard's body. It was surprised to suddenly be unable to move and started to struggle violently, but my magic wasn't so weak that it would break from that.

The moment the lizardman noticed something was happening and turned back, Adele fetched her twin swords, closed the distance, and decapitated the lizardman. Then she leaped on top of the monitor lizard and thrust both of her blades into its head. Blood gushed from the monster and it lost its strength, so I released my magic.

Thus, in a single instant, the lizardman and the monitor lizard were defeated.

It's incredible that she's already that strong. If I manage to get her on my side, I won't have to be too concerned even if Lumié and Kevin betray me. Just as I thought, she's indispensable.

"You're not hurt?" I asked the kid. I honestly didn't care, but Adele liked people who were kind to children, so I had to show that I did.

"Huh? Ah, yes."

The kid was uninjured, meaning that the rescue went perfectly.

There were some monitor lizards left so Adele went to take care of them. After a few minutes, once she was certain everything was fine, she came back and bowed to me.

“You saved me. Thanks.”

The fact that she’d thanked me proved that everything was going according to my plan. From here on, what I’d say would be important. I had to be prudent.

“Without you, we couldn’t have saved anybody. I’m the one who’s grateful. Thanks.”

“...What do you mean?” She cocked her head.

Man, she’s really pretty.

She was close to twenty, with a shapely nose and gorgeous, luscious lips, and... Wait, what the hell was I thinking?! I thought I could do without women for a while, but apparently, she attracted Jack’s spirit.

Ah, yeah, in the game he was quite the womanizer. I need to be careful.

“Literally what I said. I’m Jack Girard, the baron governing these lands. Once again, thanks for protecting my people.”

“You, a baron...? There’s no way a noble would go out without guards. You might think you can deceive me because I’m a commoner, but I’m not that dumb.” She burst out laughing in disbelief, clutching her sides. She laughed so hard that she almost started crying.

Thinking about it, I wasn’t dressed like an aristocrat. My equipment was that of a soldier—or a knight at best—so it was understandable that she wouldn’t believe me.

I could have easily had her executed for her insolence, but I needed her to become my guard. I couldn’t lose her over a misunderstanding. The question, however, was how to make her believe me. Fortunately...

“Master Girard!” The three soldiers who had been with me approached on their horses. They stopped before me, jumped off, and got down to their knees. “We’re your guards, so please, don’t go without us. Sir Kevin will scold us.”

So you’re more scared of Kevin scolding you than you are concerned about my

safety, huh? I really can't make light of his influence.

"Wait, Jack...no, Lord Girard? You truly are a noble?" Seeing my subordinates, Adele started to believe that I was a baron, and her tone became more courteous.

"Indeed. I'm Jack, the new head of House Girard. What's your name?"

"Eh, ah, yes! My name is Adele!" she answered, flustered.

"Adele, huh? It's a good name. I saw you fight from afar. Your swordsmanship was incredible!" I said, exaggerating a little by raising my hands.

Of course, there was a reason I praised her skill over her looks.

Adele had always been looked down on as a swordswoman because of her gender. Her master was sexist and never recognized her skill, only teaching his secret techniques to the male disciples, even if they were far inferior to her. Adele was treated as an underling, having to wake up early to clean the floor in the morning, and stay up late at night to tidy up the training tools everyone left lying around.

And, while this was harsh enough as it was, other disgusting things had happened to her. However, the one I felt was the worst was the time her master made a pass at her.

One night, as she was taking care of the wooden swords, Adele's master and a few other disciples assaulted her. They tore her clothes and ignored her cries. However, just before she was going to lose everything, she used one of the wooden swords she had kept in her hand and beat the disciples to death. Then she knocked down her master, who was trembling in fear, put on new clothes, and set out on a journey while hiding her identity. A lot happened after that. She became an adventurer, and finally ended up here.

As such, praising her beauty would just awaken her trauma and put her in a bad mood. Talking about her looks was taboo. If you tried that in the game, she'd reject Jack and leave. There was no way to get her again later, so if you made the wrong choice here, you had to reset the game.

"R-Really?" she asked.

“Yeah. I only used my binding magic because I thought you’d be able to do something if I made an opening. If you were second-rate, I’d have been too scared to come help.”

“Thank you...very much...” Adele said, beginning to cry. She had finally received recognition for the thing she had always wanted to be recognized for. Of course she would be overcome with emotion.



Ha ha... Just as planned.

With this, my first impression was perfect. I just needed a little more to have her absolute trust. That way, even if I started to live my luxurious, extravagant lifestyle, she wouldn't betray me and would continue to protect me. That was just how diligent and dutiful she was.

"I want to invite you to my mansion as a guest to thank you for defending the village. Is that fine with you?"

"What I did was trivial. There is no need to thank me!"

Tch. You're too damn earnest. Just accept it happily already.

"Adele. You should understand what you did. Look." I pointed at the church. Once the villagers realized all the monsters had been killed, they exited the building and hugged each other, rejoicing over their survival. "They escaped death because of your wonderful skills with your twin swords. And you say that's trivial? You're denying the techniques you risked your life to learn? I can't allow that!" I grasped her by the shoulders.

She stiffened a little. She might have remembered the time she had been assaulted for an instant.

"Anyone who helps my people helps me. If I don't show you my gratitude, people will criticize me for being an ingrate. So can't you think of it as helping me and just let me thank you?" I gave her the excuse that it wasn't for her, but for me.

If her personality was the same as it was in the game, she would accept. If not, that would mean my knowledge and reality were different. In case of the latter, making Adele my ally might actually be dangerous and I would need to revise my plans.

"...Understood. I will humbly accept your gratitude, so could you please step away from me?"

"Oh, sorry. It's rude of me to do that to a woman." I let go of her shoulders and took a few steps back.

Adele was surprised to see a noble like me apologize. My respectful attitude

combined with my recognition of her skills with twin swords should have made her have a truly good impression of me.

Now that the matter with Adele was settled, I gave orders to the noisy soldiers. “Go around the village to inspect the damage and return when you’re done.”

“Certainly! We’ll fulfill our duty even if we have to risk our lives!” one of them shouted.

For some reason, their eyes were sparkling with even more admiration than earlier.

Oh well. As long as they’re motivated.

* * *

We went around the village following Master Jack’s orders, but surprisingly there were almost no casualties. There were a few wounded, but nobody died.

However, the monitor lizards did a lot of damage. They ravaged the fields and ate almost all the food reserves. Moreover, most of the buildings were destroyed. If there weren’t people here, it’d look like the village was abandoned. Thankfully, our territory stayed pretty warm even during the winter, so the people wouldn’t freeze to death. The problem was the food. At this rate, the villagers would starve.

Crap, what to do?!

Unfortunately, it wasn’t like a mere soldier like me would come up with a solution. I could only do the work I was tasked with, so I focused on noting down the damage done to the village. I mainly wrote about the ravaged fields, as I thought it was the most important considering how serious of an issue the food shortage was.

I’m sure Master Jack will do something about it. He’s really considerate of his people.

I hurriedly returned to the mansion and went to Kevin’s office to report Third Village’s damage.

“When I heard that a lizardman and his minions assaulted the village I was

prepared to hear of its entire destruction, but there was less damage than I expected,” Kevin said after carefully reading the report I wrote. He then looked at me.

I don't like when he watches me like this. His eyes feel like they can read people's minds. Lumié said I just needed to get used to it, but is that really possible? I don't think I can, I thought, remembering my sister.

“I'll discuss how to deal with this matter with Master Jack.” He paused. “So, Ludwig, what did you think of this incident?”

“I'm deeply moved to know that our lord is kind and considerate of his people!” I said proudly. I thought it was an exemplary answer, but it appeared I was wrong as Kevin shook his head while massaging his temple.

“I asked the wrong question. Why did Master Jack know about the attack?”

“He said he had read in a report that a lizardman had been sighted.”

“Did he really...? I guess I can just check later. Then what about that woman, Adele? How did their relationship look?”

“Huh? It looked like their first meeting. Master Jack was charmed by her skills with twin swords and, having seen her fight, I totally agree. I mean, I also thought she looked beautiful! She was incredible, and I really want her to teach me how to fight like that!”

He sighed. “That's enough. I got it.”

I felt like the way he stopped the conversation was a little sloppy, but there was no way I would complain to him so I just shut up. He seemed to be in some sort of a bad mood, so I thought I made the right call.

“I checked about Adele with the Adventurer Guild. She's the ideal kind of adventurer: someone with irreproachable conduct and a high success rate. There's no need to be too cautious about her, so you and the others can guard the mansion as usual.”

“Yes, sir! Well then, excuse me!” I saluted and exited the room.

Once in the hallway, I came across Lumié.

“Oh, Ludwig. You finished your report?” she asked.

“Yep. Did it properly.”

“Really?” She came next to me and poked my cheek, smiling.

She might be my sister, but sometimes I thought she got a little too close. However, considering how she had raised me instead of our late parents, I couldn’t really complain about it. And, well, it wasn’t like I hated it.

“Of course! I answered all the questions he asked.”

“Seems like you’re telling the truth.” She stopped poking me and, just like she would praise a kid, patted my head.

I let her do as she pleased for a while but, suddenly, she stopped. Her smile vanished and she stared at me with a serious look.

“Do you like your work? It’s not too hard?”

It seemed like a casual question, but it was far from it. The pressure I felt from it made me realize that my reply would influence my future. It was something that only I, her little brother who had spent years with her, could notice.

As such, I answered honestly. “Until recently, the territory was in a horrible state. Each time I patrolled, I saw tragedies that made me want to avert my eyes. I thought about running away with you a few times.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But now, it’s different.”

Since Master Jack became the new lord, everything changed. The people got their smiles back. All the patrolling soldiers noticed it, and that made us feel confident that we were doing the right thing.

“Now, I can feel that my job is worth doing. I can take pride in the fact that I’m protecting you and the people, just by being here in Girard territory,” I said.

“That’s good. Is that also thanks to Master Jack?”

“Yep. I feel bad for the previous head, but I’m honestly glad he fell ill.”

Lumié put her finger on my lips to stop my bad-mouthing. “You shouldn’t say that. We don’t know who’s listening.”

True. Who knew what Master Jack would do if he heard about it?

I said too much, I reflected.

“Well then, I’m going back to my work.” Lumié tapped my shoulder lightly and walked away.

I understood that she wanted to know if her little brother did his job properly, but she worried way too much about me. That was why she was still single.

If only she could find a boyfriend already, I thought as I watched my sister’s back.

Chapter 2: Recompense

As I was working in my office, someone knocked at the door.

“I brought Lady Adele.”

“Enter,” I said.

Two days had passed since the lizardman incident, and the time had come to show my gratitude. I’d given her my best first impression, and my preparations were perfect. Surely, everything would go well from now on too.

“Excuse me.” Lumié entered first. The combination of her blonde hair, golden eyes, and white skin gave her a bright and clean impression, and the contrast with her black maid uniform was exquisite. What’s more, she had big breasts! If I hadn’t known about her future betrayal, I might have laid a hand on her.

Anyway, she stood next to the door and bowed, then Adele entered too.

“E-Excuse me.” Her dog ears were perked straight up and she looked quite nervous. No wonder, considering it was her first time in a noble’s mansion.

Lumié stayed next to the door and Adele walked to the center of the room.

“Thanks for taking the time to come.”

“This is nothing! You do not need to be so considerate!”

Just a few words of gratitude were enough to make her panic and wave her hands around. Just by looking at her tail, which was swaying furiously, I knew that Adele had fallen under my charm.

She’s just like a puppy. So cute.

Of course, saying it aloud would worsen the impression she had of me, so I kept that to myself.

I put the pen I was using on the desk, stood up, and went to Adele with a rolled-up piece of parchment in my hand. “You’re the hero who saved a village in my domain. As thanks, I’ll give you a suitable reward.”

“No! I am far from being a hero! Wait, what? Am I really going to receive a

reward for that?!”

I forcibly handed the parchment to the confused Adele. “Of course. I never lie. Your recompense is ten gold coins and one item from our treasury.”

Funnily enough, Lumié was the first to react in shock.

Ten gold coins was around a million yen, which wasn't that much. However, items in the treasure vault were different. Among them were priceless twin swords passed down from generation to generation and, as you might have guessed, I intended to have Adele use them. It was a steep cost, but it was necessary to destroy all the bad ending flags, so I absolutely needed her to accept them.

“Lumié will give you the money later. First, let's go to the treasury.”

“Now?!” Adele exclaimed.

Man, she's really cute, overreacting to everything I say.

“Yeah. Follow me.”

There was a reason I was in such a hurry. If Kevin heard of this, there was a chance he would try to stop me. Naturally, as his master, I could force my opinion on him, but we would surely quarrel. In that case, it was easier to do it and say I'd be more careful after the fact to head off the dispute. That way, my relationship with Kevin wouldn't deteriorate too much. Considering I had to restore the ruined territory left by my parents *and* destroy all the bad ending flags that would stand in my way, losing Kevin would be problematic.

We exited my office and walked through the hallway. All the paintings, weird vases, chairs, and other furniture that had recently cluttered the corridor had been removed. The only thing left was the extravagant carpet that was so soft your feet almost sank into it.

All the useless stuff was being put up for sale, just like I had ordered. With this, my impression of being a greedy aristocrat should disappear. I'd live my life of luxury stealthily. If I showed off my wealth like my stupid parents, I'd just earn everyone's envy.

Anyway, only Adele was following me. Lumié wasn't here anymore. She had

probably gone to report what I was doing to Kevin, but now that I had announced the reward I'd give, it was too late. Her effort was pointless.

I opened the three locks on the door and took the lantern hanging on the wall before we entered. The lantern was made from a magic stone taken from a monster. It was a high-class item that could turn on and off just by clicking a button. I didn't know how it worked, and there wasn't any mention of its inner workings in the game's documents, so the creator probably didn't think about it. Many fangames were like that—no one thought about the small details.

We descended the stairs and arrived in the basement. The air was stagnant and stank of dust. Our surroundings were dark, and the lantern in my hand was the only source of light.

"We've arrived."

I looked at Adele. Her face, illuminated by the pale light, was tense. Considering she was alone with a man in a basement, it wasn't weird that she would feel in danger. She was strong enough to easily repel me if I tried to assault her, but past traumas were difficult to overcome.

"Don't worry. Well, not like that would make you feel better, I suppose. I don't intend to cause you any harm, so please, relax," I said in a soft, gentle voice. Of course, it was a calculated action to make her trust me.

"Huh? I would not mind if you were to kill me, Lord Jack. Still, thank you for your consideration."

Wait, what? That's not the kind of reply I was expecting. Well, I guess that means she's already reached max affection and loyalty...?

"Let's enter." I opened the treasure vault's door and stepped inside.

On the shelves on either side were gold bullion, jewels, necklaces, and other accessories. My parents had ordered for the more showy treasures to be displayed like that. The plainer stuff, like precious grimoires, documents received from the royal family, valuable ores, and other such items were piled up in wooden boxes in the corner of the room. In fact, what was in the wooden boxes was more valuable than what was on the shelves.

Finally, hanging on the wall at the back of the room were curved twin swords.

They were slightly shorter than normal one-handed swords, and had sharp single-edged blades with a poisonous-violet color. In the game, they had a fixed chance to inflict poison, and from Jack's knowledge, they could do the same in the real world too.

"These twin swords..." Adele trailed off.

"These masterpieces were made from the fangs of a hydra, a huge dragon monster with nine heads. Pouring mana into them produces a coat of deadly poison on the blades."

Naturally, it wasn't as potent as the hydra's, but it was still quite virulent. In a record I had read, it was once tested on a criminal; he'd died within a minute, violently writhing in pain. Even if the story had been exaggerated, it didn't change the fact that it was a very potent poison.

Adele didn't even glance at the other treasures and tottered toward the Twin Hydra Blades, as if she was captivated by them.

"For some reason, I feel like they fit right into my hands..." she muttered after she took them from the wall.

Of course they would. Until the midgame, they were the strongest weapons Adele could use. If they didn't feel right to her, I'd be concerned.

"Do you like them?" I asked.

"Huh? Yes, but... They are too good to serve as a reward for saving a village. I must refuse."

A hydra was so powerful that it could crush even an entire army. Only the best champions could win and, in fact, there were only a few recorded cases of hydras being defeated in history. Saving a village—nay, saving an entire town—wouldn't be enough to warrant such a rare item as a reward. No wonder Adele hesitated.

"I said you could get one item from the treasury. These Twin Hydra Blades are included, so you can have them."

"But..."

"You feel guilty for receiving so much?"

“Yes. Even ten gold coins is already too much for me.”

“In that case, what about this? Would you like to become my guard and my swordsmanship instructor?” I proposed.

Not only will I have Adele protect me, but I'll also use her to become stronger. Isn't that the best plan ever?! I'm a genius!

I didn't want to train, but Jack was the game's protagonist and couldn't escape from battles. Considering I was half-forced by fate to battle, I had to become stronger even if I didn't want to.

“Your guard and your swordsmanship instructor?!” Adele exclaimed, the Twin Hydra Blades still in her hands.

She had stopped thinking from the shock. I should press on before she could collect herself.

“Exactly. That way, I wouldn't end up as a liar, and you wouldn't have to feel guilty,” I explained while taking a few steps toward her.

“But...”

“I'm sure the Twin Hydra Blades would rather be used by a skilled swordswoman than stay in this musty room.”

“I am...a skilled swordswoman...?” She looked at the dual blades hesitantly.

People were beings that indulged in their greed. Her reaction was natural. Surely, she was currently imagining herself using them in battle. I just needed another push and—

“No, I cannot accept them. I am not worthy,” she firmly declared.

What?! Why are you putting them back on the wall when you were looking at them with such greedy eyes just a few seconds ago?!

“This is enough for me,” Adele said as she grabbed a handful of dust.

“No, wait! That's just dust!” I shouted.

“But it was in this room. That way, nobody can call you a liar.”

That's just sophistry! Don't mess up my plan!

“My vassals will criticize me if I reward my benefactor with dust! Please reconsider!”

I started to panic as my plan fell apart. I didn’t even panic that much when I was poisoned by my parents or when I became Jack in the first place. I couldn’t predict the thoughts and actions of a purehearted girl like her, not with *my* dirty heart. To me, she was almost more terrifying than a monster.

“Hmm, true, that would trouble you...” Adele glanced at the shelves, but everything on them looked expensive, so she went toward the wooden boxes instead. “Can I open these?”

“Do as you please.” I gave her permission and she opened the one in front of her.

Inside were some decorative plates and documents—useless to adventurers—so she closed it and opened another one.

As Adele searched through the boxes, I desperately accelerated my thoughts to come up with a way to deal with her.

Should I forcibly make her a vassal of House Girard? She’s skilled, yeah, but she’s an adventurer from who knows where, so everyone’s gonna oppose that. The territory’s already on the decline; if some vassals start to betray me, well, my luxurious life isn’t just going to be a distant dream—it’s going to be completely impossible. It will be different in a few years, but right now, I have to pay attention to my retainers. I can’t have her become my vassal now.

In that case, I can only let her choose something at random and negotiate to employ her as my guard and swordsmanship instructor. She wouldn’t be chained by her gratitude toward me, which would make me scared about the possibility of her betraying me, but she’d still be more trustworthy than Lumié and Kevin.

The worst case would be to not have Adele on my side at all. To avoid her leaving me, I need to compromise.

“Nothing here either...” she muttered, going through another box.

Her words could be taken as if she were saying there was nothing of value in the treasury. A normal noble would angrily call her rude, but I needed her, so I let it go.

Adele finished searching all the wooden boxes and looked at me. Then she slightly lowered her gaze and... “Ah. Then what about the ring you are wearing, Lord Jack? That is also in the treasury.”

She made another unexpected suggestion. True, it was currently in the treasure vault.

However, the mithril ring on my little finger just slightly increased my magic resistance. It was basically worthless compared to the Twin Hydra Blades. Regardless, considering Adele was trying to be considerate, I couldn't refuse.

Should I compromise...? Wait, why am I already giving up? The value of an object is always in flux. If it doesn't have any worth, I just need to make some! Man, I'm really on the ball today!

“Ah, this?” I took the ring off and held it between my thumb and index finger. The light of the lantern made it shine, giving the impression it was a special ring with a history behind it. “It's a keepsake I bought to commemorate my fifteenth birthday when I became an adult.”

Of course, that was a lie. From Jack's memories, I knew it was just a present from a merchant.

“Huh...? I cannot accept something so imp—”

“If you like it, then you can have it,” I quickly said, forcing the ring in her hand before she could finish her sentence. That way, she couldn't easily refuse.

“Is it not important to you?” she asked.

“It is.”

“Then—”

“That's why I want you to have it, Adele.”

“...Why me?”

“Saving the village isn't the only reason.”

I heard her swallow.

Good! She's being taken by the atmosphere.

“I'm mostly limited to obstruction and support magic. My old teacher told me

I didn't have any talent for attack spells." I made my tone as sad as possible, while keeping my expression resolute to show that I hadn't given up.

Just as planned, she stared at me with empathy. She saw her past self—looked down on as incompetent—in me. She was probably imagining me crying in despair for my lack of talent.

"I hate myself for being unable to do anything when my people are in danger. I want to be strong enough to win against monitor lizards and lizardmen."

"You have such a strong desire..."

"I do. And that's why, when I saw you dancing with your crimson blades, cutting down monsters like it was the easiest thing in the world, I thought I wanted to be like that. Honestly, it was love at first sight."

"You fell in love with the way I fight..." she muttered.

I used words that would appeal to her self-esteem. For Adele, who had always been looking for recognition, that must have felt very satisfying.

"No matter how harsh the training is, I can—no, I *will* endure it. To show you my resolve, I want you to have this ring. I will also give you a monthly salary. So please, won't you become my instructor?!" I bowed. With this, the fact that I *really* wanted her by my side should have been conveyed.

I thought she would immediately accept, but even after a few seconds, she didn't say anything.

What's the problem? Did I not praise her enough? I raised my head only to find her sobbing.

"Wh-Why are you crying?!" I shouted.

Holy crap! Did I fail to win her over?! I hope they're not tears of parting, or my life will be in danger! Jack can even die in side quests, so I really need her!

"I am just so happy...that you recognized my skills... Thank you very much," she explained, wiping her tears.

I was so panicked that I'd immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion. Who would have thought she would be happy enough to cry?

“Are you really fine with someone like me?” she asked.

“It *has* to be you, Adele!”

“...Understood. Well then, I look forward to working as your instructor, *Master Jack*.”

As the negotiations came to a successful close, the tension left my body. Perhaps I let myself get carried away by the atmosphere, but I reflexively embraced Adele. Considering how she didn’t stiffen or struggle, she must have accepted me from the bottom of her heart.

It’s an even better result than if she had accepted the Twin Hydra Blades... Man, I’m really a scumbag for thinking like that. I’m starting to feel guilty now. Maybe I should pamper her a little...

“Master Jack!” Kevin called angrily from the treasure vault’s entrance. Lumié, who must have guided him, was just behind.

Tch, don’t interrupt us when we have a good thing going.

“How could you think of giving one of House Girard’s treasures to someone?!” he shouted.

I’d only given her my ring, but he hadn’t been here to see that, so it was no wonder he would misunderstand. I could see him frown in anger even in the dimly lit room.

Not only was it obvious from his physique, I knew from the game that Kevin was an old veteran who’d survived countless battlefields. If he decided to use his strength, there was no way I could win. Feeling that I might be in danger, I added a request to Adele.

“To tell you the truth, there aren’t that many people I can trust in this mansion,” I whispered.

“Huh, really? That is rather sad...”

“So can I count on you to protect me when we’re not training?”

“Of course! There is no need to worry; I will protect you no matter what!”

I’d mostly said that on a whim, so I was surprised that she actually accepted.

We didn't even talk about the terms and her salary yet. Though, if you considered that as proof of her trust in me, that wasn't a bad thing.

As long as I'm careful with her affection and loyalty, she shouldn't betray me.

"I'm counting on you. We'll talk about your wages later."

"It is natural for a master to protect their disciple. I do not need any money."

"No. I need to pay compensation for your skills. They're worth it."

"Master Jack...!" Adele exclaimed with moist eyes, deeply moved. However, the instant Kevin stepped into the room, her expression changed. She narrowed her eyes, entering battle mode, and stood in front of me. As we were in the mansion she didn't have her dual swords, but with her strength, she should be able to win even unarmed.

"Any complaints, Kevin?" I said oppressively. Indeed, with Adele by my side, I didn't have to worry about him betraying me! From now on, I'd be strict with him.

"Like I said, how could you give a treasure of House Girard to a girl who—"

"She isn't just a girl," I interjected. "She's Adele, my new swordsmanship instructor. I won't let you be rude to her."

Kevin gasped in surprise, not expecting that I would oppose him. "...You intend to learn swordsmanship, Master Jack?"

The way he said it was as if he was implying that he didn't want me getting stronger. I could see it in his eyes.

"Exactly. At the very least, I want to be able to protect myself."

He gasped once again, even more surprised than last time. Maybe he was thinking that it'd be even more of a pain to deal with me when he betrays me.

"Adele's room will be next to mine. Get it ready today," I ordered Lumié.

She bowed deeply and went up the stairs, obeying without complaint. Seeing her act like a proper maid put me in a good mood.

"I'll show Adele around the mansion, then we'll talk about her wages. I leave locking up to you," I said, pushing Kevin to the side to exit the room.

“Master Jack! We still have to talk about whatever you have just given away!”

Jeez, what a pain.

I stopped and turned back, bringing my face close to his. “Since when did you get the right to impose your opinion on me, your master?”

People in this world had three organs that could produce, store, and release mana: one in the chest, one in the abdomen, and one in the forehead. When you killed monsters, that organ strengthened—and, at the same time, your physical abilities improved as well.

Anyway, I released a part of the mana stored in the organ in my abdomen and added my will—hostility toward Kevin—to transform it into bloodlust and pressure.

Kevin gasped and grimaced.

So, how do you feel about being overwhelmed by the guy you thought was useless scum? I taunted him in my mind. My mana was coiled around his body, so he couldn’t move. Though still not as strong as Kevin, Jack was the protagonist of the game, and he had great combat potential.

“I’m the patriarch of this house and nobody can oppose me. Got it?”

“Yes...” Kevin answered feebly.

I stopped releasing my mana, turned back, and looked at Adele. “Let’s go. I’ll show you around the mansion.”

She nodded and we went up the stairs.

Now that I had obtained the strongest spear and shield, I was invincible. My mood was at its best as I relished this feeling of omnipotence.

* * *

Only after Master Jack left the basement was I released from the tension that had taken over my body. I had been through countless battlefields, and yet, few were the people who could release such pressure. When did that selfish and lazy child become such a good man?

I would love to train him myself but, unfortunately, he seemed to hate me. I

felt a little lonely and sad about that.

“Nobody’s here,” I muttered to myself, confirming that everyone had left, and locked the door with my spare keys.

I had thought that Adele tricked him into giving her a treasure of House Girard, but nothing was missing, so I was apparently mistaken. Just like Lumié, I wondered what he was thinking, but even more importantly than that: Master Jack showed interest in learning swordsmanship. He said that he wanted the strength to protect himself.

Did that mean he understood the situation House Girard was currently in?

We had made many enemies because of the previous head’s wrongdoings. The situation was so critical that a normal person wouldn’t have even considered taking over the domain, and simply fled for their life. And yet, Master Jack chose to protect House Girard by fighting head-on.

His spirit was praiseworthy and, just as my family had done for generations, I wanted to protect House Girard with him.

To that end, I was even ready to dirty my hands.

I hope you’ll live up to my expectations, Master Jack. The moment you disappoint me... Well, I’ll just search for someone more suitable to be the new master of House Girard.

* * *

A few days had passed since Adele became my instructor.

Today, I woke up early and went into my office to read the new reports from my domain while eating bread. The Girard territory had a village in all four cardinal directions where wheat and vegetables were cultivated, and at the center was the only town with real facilities: a general store, a blacksmith, the different guilds, a church, a hospital, barracks, and my mansion. It was the heart of the Girard territory.

I finished going through the reports, and apparently, reducing taxes had been a good move. There weren’t any signs that an insurrection was stirring.

“Master Jack. We have received an urgent petition from Third Village.”

Incidentally, the villages didn't have real names, but were instead referred to by their number. Third Village was the one Adele had saved around a week ago.

I had read Ludwig's report so I could guess the petition's contents.

"Give it to me," I said, stealing the parchment from Kevin's hands. I wanted to confirm it with my own eyes to be sure.

It started with words of gratitude for saving them, followed with an explanation that their crops had been heavily damaged and their emergency stores annihilated, then finished with a request to be exempted from taxes. Just as I'd expected.

"What will you do?" Kevin asked.

I looked at him. Maybe he was testing me to know what kind of decision I'd make.

"I won't exempt them from taxes."

If I did, they would be happy, but that would make them more adverse to paying taxes the year after. They might notice that if I weren't in the picture, everything in their village would remain their own. Also, if I reduced taxes each time something bad happened, people would think that I was soft and that would make them harder to govern.

As such, I didn't want to grant them an exemption. Raising taxes in the other villages to cover the reconstruction expenses was a bad idea too, since I'd just lowered them in the first place. Still, I couldn't ignore their petition, as that would create a rumor that I had abandoned them—I'd be heading straight into the revolt route.

I needed to do something about it.

"However, we'll give them a year's worth of food from the reserves in the mansion." As long as they had food, they should be able to somewhat cope with the unpleasant situation. And if I also helped with rebuilding their village, it should bring a better result than simply exempting them from taxes. "Also, ask the guild to prepare a plan for the rebuilding and send a few carpenters."

"How much money can we use?"

“Use the money you’ll earn from selling the furniture and art.”

Because of my trash parents, House Girard’s finances had been in the red for years. Originally, I intended to use the money from the sales to treat myself, but abandoning the village might make the hero come to punish me. I was forced to do this to avoid that bad ending flag.

“I will take care of this immediately,” Kevin said.

“If anyone complains, bring them to me.”

Anyone opposing me was someone who could betray me in the future, so I had to remember their names and faces.

“I do not think anyone would raise such a complaint...” Kevin replied.

It was obvious from his answer that he didn’t understand my thoughts. It wasn’t like he was stupid—far from it—just that he didn’t consider the possibility that I was cautious of traitors. That was a good thing for me, as that meant that he had his guard down.

“That’s fine as well. But if they do complain, bring them here.”

“Understood.” He bowed and left the office.

I finished my work and exited the room too. The moment I did, Lumié, who had been on standby in the office, followed me. We both walked silently. If I had been the previous Jack, I’d have grabbed her ass, but I didn’t want to do things that would hasten her treason.

Once in the courtyard, I took two wooden swords and approached Adele, who was already outside doing practice swings.

“I’m counting on you for today’s training too, Master,” I said. By the way, I only called her “Master” during practice. There wasn’t any real meaning to it—just a whim of mine.

“Do you want to start now?” she asked.

“Of course.”

The afternoon was training time. In the past, Jack used that time to learn magic, but the teacher was a woman so he harassed her sexually until she quit.

That was why I only knew a few elementary and intermediate spells, and was the real explanation as to why Jack was weak at the start of the game.

Anyway, the previous Jack would have indulged himself in women and stayed weak, but there was no way I would do something so foolish considering the knowledge of the future I had.

I faced Adele and our practice match commenced.

Unfortunately, the only thing I could do was endure her fierce strikes without finding a chance to counterattack. Even after training for days, I still couldn't keep up with the speed of her swords. We both used twin blades, and yet she landed so many blows that it felt like she had four swords to my two. Moreover, she had good eyes and was incredibly agile, so even when I actually managed to counterattack, I only struck air.

My stamina was depleted and my body screamed in pain, but I didn't stop. I desperately moved my arms to defend myself against Adele's attacks. I had come today with the determination to win, but contrary to my will, my body just grew ever heavier and my movement dulled.

"You are wide open, Master Jack!" She honed in the instant I stopped moving because of my fatigue and struck my thigh with one of her wooden swords.

She wasn't fighting seriously so I didn't break a bone, but the strength ebbed out of me and I fell to my knees. When I raised my head, I found the tip of her sword before my eyes.

"The way you distribute your mana to strengthen your body is uneven. If you had strengthened yourself uniformly, a strike from a wooden sword would not hurt you."

"Haa...haa... I still...can't do it, huh...? This is hard..." I said, panting.

"You learn fast, Master Jack, so you should not worry about it."

Adele offered me her hand and I took it to get up.

If the strongest character in the game said it, then it was the truth. As long as I trained seriously, I should become stronger.

My method isn't wrong. If I want to live luxuriously in the future, I need to do

my best today. I reaffirmed my resolve.

Three hours later, I got used to strengthening my body with mana. However, my stamina had reached its limit. I panted heavily, my body drenched in sweat and my muscles completely worn out. Even the simple act of moving was tiresome.

On the other hand, Adele, despite moving just as much as me, hadn't even broken a sweat. In fact, she was even smiling for some reason.

Does she have talent as a sadist or something? She was meeker and gentler in the game, but I guess reality is slightly different.

"We should rest a little," she suggested, taking my fatigue into consideration.

Phew, thank god. Would have been hard to continue like that.

"Yeah, let's."

The courtyard had a round table with three chairs for resting and appreciating the garden. Adele and I sat down and took a breather. The sky was blue and cloudless, and I felt my hot body cool down as the wind blew.

"I brought black tea and sweets," Lumié announced as she put two cups on the table and filled them. I didn't know what kind of leaves she used, but I could smell citrus. As for the cookies, there were more than enough for two.

"You should hydrate yourself, Master." If I didn't expressly say it, Adele probably wouldn't touch anything.

Once I saw her take her cup, I did the same and drank the tea. The taste was refreshing and it had a little sweetness to it that relieved fatigue. The cookies were crisp and satisfying. Our head chef was quite skilled.

"...It's delicious," Adele muttered to herself as she took another sip. Her swaying tail confirmed her delight.

Ever since she started learning swordsmanship, she had spent most of her life in poverty—so she must have been glad to be able to have her fill of sugar. She savored her cookies, eating them slowly and carefully one by one.

I, on the other hand, ate them two or three at a time. It made me feel like I

lived luxuriously and I loved that.

“Eat plenty and grow a lot.”

“Thank you very much.” She put her cup on the table and started to eat cookies with alternating hands.

That was bad manners, and the previous Jack would have reprimanded her. However, how could I do that when she made them look so delicious? Though I guess my knowledge and ethics as a Japanese person in my previous life played a part in my consternation.

As I drank my tea and watched her, Ludwig ran toward us in a hurry.

“Master Jack!” he called in a familiar air, thinking we were on good terms thanks to the Third Village incident. Suddenly addressing your master as he did was also a clear lack of manners.

However, Lumié scolded him before I could. “Ludwig! You have to salute first!”

“S-Sorry, Sis...”

“I’m not the one you should apologize to.”

Ludwig kneeled before me with tears in his eyes from being scolded.

Wait, what? He’s Lumié’s little brother?!

Lumié’s parents were dead and her little brother was her only relative left. If I got angry at him in public, it would worsen his social standing. In that case, her precious family would be in trouble because of me, and she would hold a grudge—that might become the spark of her betrayal.

Thank god she spoke before me...

It was overly naive of me to only pay attention to the game scenario. Treachery and bad ending flags lurked in the moments of everyday life not covered by the information I had from the game.

I’m so lucky to have noticed this before it was too late!

“I’m sorry, Master Jack.” Ludwig bowed and apologized.

“I don’t mind. So, why were you in such a hurry?”

“There is an urgent matter I need to report. A hidden field has been discovered in Third Village. It’s large enough to account for a third of their taxes.”

This country calculated its taxes by predicting how much each village would harvest based on the size of their fields. Naturally, that meant hidden fields weren’t included in the count, which meant they were pure profit for the villagers. I had wondered for a while how they could survive when they had to give up ninety percent of their crops, and here was the explanation. They petitioned to be exempt from taxes, but behind the scenes they were already evading them, which was an act of treason—something that I hated more than anything.

I won’t forgive this affront! I’ll definitely kill the ringleader.

“How did you find out about it?” I asked.

“Another soldier stayed at the village when I came back to give my report on the damage. He noticed that, sometimes, the village chief disappeared. Curious, he decided to tail him, and...”

“He found the field.”

“Yes. It was in the forest.”

Ludwig and the others looked unreliable, and yet thanks to their quick-wittedness, they discovered an act of betrayal against me. I thought they were sacrificial pawns, but they were actually quite useful. I should reward them for that.

“Good work. I’ll give fifty silver coins to the soldier who found it,” I said.

“Th-That much?!”

“That’s how meaningful his intel was. There’s nothing to be surprised about.”

The money will be coming from the newfound hidden field anyway, so it didn’t affect my finances.

I stood up and turned toward Adele. “It seems we have a problem. The villagers you saved were evading taxes. I’m going there now, so come with me as a guard.”

“Yes! I will protect you no matter what, Master Jack!” she declared.

“I’m counting on you.”

Even taking into account the fact that the people she saved would be harshly punished under the law, Adele still prioritized me. It really made me feel glad to have made the effort to make her my ally.

“Master Jack! Excuse me, but I have something else to report!” Ludwig added, still kneeling.

He’s been doing nothing but reporting bad news. Guess there’s another problem.

“What is it?”

“The nest of a monster group led by lizardmen was found next to the lake near Third Village.”

A new side quest, huh?

These quests were events happening in between the main story to let you level up and gain money. Another main appeal to them was that they increased the affinity of the characters that did the quests with Jack. Affinity was an important parameter, as the higher it was, the lesser your chances of being betrayed. I proactively did them when I played the game, hearing that you could avoid Lumié and Kevin’s betrayals if you did the right ones, but it was very difficult and, to my frustration, I never managed to reach that scenario.

“What should we do?” Ludwig asked, waiting for my orders.

I wrote about this side quest in my notes, so I remembered the event with the lizardmen. You could only challenge it if Adele survived, since it wouldn’t occur if she died. To avenge their fallen compatriot, the lizardmen were going to lead a group of monitor lizards and goblins to destroy Third Village, and even assault my mansion. The quest was at the beginning of the game, so having to fight a ton of monsters made it quite difficult. I had a hard time with it when I played. It was still a bad ending flag, though a bit of a boring one. However, for some reason, it was happening earlier than how I remembered it.

“They’re mad that we’ve killed one of them and will probably attack Third

Village. We need to exterminate them,” I declared. To live, I had to fight. I needed to act fast. “Make preparations. We’re going tomorrow.”

“Y-Yes, sir!” Ludwig stood up and hurriedly ran toward the barracks to relay my orders to everyone else.

Chapter 3: The Lizardmen's Counterattack

I should have been in a rush to assemble soldiers, but as a poor baron I could only mobilize around thirty. I needed to do something about that first.

I put my cup on the table and looked at Adele, who was silently waiting for me to speak. "Master, will you fight against the lizardmen with me?"

"Of course. I will slaughter anyone who threatens your territory, Master Jack!" she declared.

As long she's with me, I can win.

I gave my wooden swords to Lumié and returned to my office. Adele went to her room to prepare, and Lumié didn't follow me since she was putting the swords away.

I took the chance of being alone in the room to take a look at my game notes. This side quest was called "The Lizardmen's Counterattack" and was an assault from 300 monsters: 100 monitor lizards, 150 goblins, and 50 lizardmen. In terms of numbers, they had us beat by a factor of ten.

Considering you had almost no choices at the beginning of the game, such a difference in military strength was harsh. Only a fangame could get away with something so absurd. An official game would be criticized for being too hard for casual players and would be patched to lower the difficulty.

"It was fun when it was a game, but now that it's reality, my only impression is 'fuck this,'" I complained.

Maybe this world had a save-and-load function too, but I was too scared to die and find out. And though it was similar, it didn't seem like this world was exactly the same as the game, so it was better to think that everything would be over if I died.

Moreover, even with Adele, my chances of victory were only around fifty percent. I was facing a lot of enemies, so I needed to beef up my allied forces too. The fastest method would be to employ adventurers, but I didn't have the money for that. It was too troublesome to think about where to curtail the

budget.

Another way would be to use my authority as the lord of the domain to force them to fight, but I would rather avoid things that could cause a backlash. After all, if the adventurers left the Girard territory after this, I'd be in a pinch for the next monster assault side quest.

"What are you doing, Master Jack?" called a voice. I looked up and found it was Kevin.

I'd been so focused on my thoughts that I hadn't noticed him entering the office. I slowly put my notes away in my chest pocket, trying not to rouse his suspicion. "I was pondering how to deal with the lizardmen."

"Ah, the report from earlier. Do we know how many they number?"

"Around 50 lizardmen and 250 monitor lizards and goblins together."

"...It might be difficult to repel them even if we mobilized all of our soldiers." He had briefly paused, probably because he wondered how I knew these numbers, but didn't say anything about it. "How about employing adventurers?"

"Not enough money. We'd need to cut the budget somewhere to get some."

"We cannot do that, though."

"I know, and I can't increase the taxes either. In the worst case, I could use my authority as the lord of these lands, but... Wait, no, I can do *that*."

"May I ask what exactly you are referring to?" Kevin's tone implied that he was wary that I would do something arbitrary again.

If you were a normal soldier, I'd reprimand you for being rude and fire you. You're lucky that you're useful.

"I'll do what I did with Adele and open the treasure vault. We'll employ adventurers for cheap and say that the ones with great accomplishments will receive precious ores and gems. That should attract some strong fighters."

Though poor, I was still a noble. I had a few things that were worth a lot of money—the Twin Hydra Blades were a good example. There were the big diamonds and emeralds my mother had collected too, and I was certain

adventurers would want them. It was an effective plan, even if I could only do it once.

“I think your idea is sound, but if people know that we opened our treasury...” Kevin trailed off.

“The merchants will leave,” I finished his sentence.

“Exactly. The clever ones will.”

If an aristocrat had to give up their treasures to employ adventurers, that meant they were nearly bankrupt. Merchants would want to leave the territory as fast as possible, thinking that a noble without money would try to find excuses to pry their fortunes out of them. The only ones who would remain would be oddballs or swindlers trying to wring out as much money as they could.

“Who cares if we lose merchants? It’s better than the entire territory going to pieces,” I said.

“Of course.”

“Then it’s time to move. I don’t want my domain to fall to ruin.” Because if it did, I wouldn’t be able to live in luxury. It had to stay safe. Also, because of all my parents’ wrongdoings, House Girard was rather widely despised. It was quite possible that I’d be assassinated the moment I stopped being a noble.

I don’t want to die yet. I don’t know if it was just on God’s whim or whatever, but I obtained a second life. I’ll struggle and greedily hold onto it until the very end.

“Kevin, you go put an urgent request to the Adventurer Guild. I leave the details to you, but don’t include the Twin Hydra Blades in the reward. I’ll use them myself.” Adele didn’t accept them, but they were too good to only gather dust in the basement. Now that I was being taught dual wielding, I’d decided to use them until Adele needed them.

“Understood. I shall assemble capable adventurers without fail,” he said, which meant I could trust him. While I couldn’t believe in his humanity, I could believe in his work ethic. Kevin left the office, and I found myself alone once again.

I took out my notes and checked the details of the quest one more time. Normally around this period, the elf sisters—who were powerful adventurers—should be in the Girard territory. Considering the enemies were only monitor lizards, lizardmen, and goblins, we would definitely win if they participated.

Also, if Kevin joined the side quest, his affinity might go up. That would buy me a little more time before his eventual betrayal.

* * *

I asked for a meeting with the guildmaster the moment I arrived at the Adventurer Guild.

Even among other baronies, House Girard had one of the smallest territories situated in the countryside. As such, its Adventurer Guild—both the association and the building itself—was quite small. The conference room I was guided to was narrow and would feel cramped if there were four or five people present. The table and chairs were made of crude wood, and the chair I sat on wobbled terribly. They didn't even have the leeway to buy new ones.

"So, I heard you have something urgent to talk about?" the pile of muscles—excuse me, the guildmaster of the Girard branch, Mason—said, folding his arms. Even after retiring from his work as an adventurer and reaching old age, he continued to train himself. At first glance, his combat ability didn't seem to have dropped much.

"I do. I have an emergency request from the lord of these lands," I answered.

Mason's eyebrow twitched. He didn't say anything, but it was obvious from his expression that he didn't want to hear more. A natural reaction, considering House Girard's bad reputation. He was apprehensive, thinking that I'd brought him an absurd request.

"I don't have the time to play along with a noble," he spat.

"Don't worry. Master Jack is a decent one."

"...Really? I heard the son was the same trash as his parents, though."

We were alone so it was fine, but normally such slander would send him to prison. Mason hated House Girard to the point of ignoring something even

children knew.

“He changed since he became the new baron. As he is currently, I think he is worthy to be my master,” I said.

“Oh? You’re not lying, are you?” He glared at me.

However, I wasn’t one to be intimidated by something like that. As a counterattack, I smiled provocatively and said, “How about checking yourself?”

I put the request on the table and Mason looked at it intently.

After a while, he rubbed his chin and asked, “A monster group centered around lizardmen, huh? You’re sure about their number?”

“If we are to believe Master Jack,” I replied.

“What do you think?”

“I’m certain what is written here is true.”

“So you trust him that much...” Mason trailed off, not knowing what to say about the fact that I believed Master Jack even without proof.

“We don’t need that many people. Just prepare a Rank A party.”

If we were to compare lizardmen to adventurer ranks, they would be around medium level—Rank C. Ranks E and F wouldn’t be able to do anything against them, and they were strong enough that we’d need many Rank D adventurers to actually win.

As such, I should normally ask for parties made of Rank D and C adventurers for this request. However, luckily, the Girard territory currently had one Rank A party. Rank A adventurers were considered to have surpassed human limits, so if *those two* participated, we could easily repel the lizardmen and their minions.

“You’re talking about the Verdant Wind?” Mason mentioned the name of the elf sisters’ Rank A party.

Generally, when adventurers reached Rank A, they either went to monster-infested places to earn glory, or went to the capital and fulfilled requests for money. However, the Verdant Wind had miraculously decided to stay in the Girard territory. They were pleased by the domain’s untouched forests, and

considered it their second home.

“Exactly. I want those eccentric elf sisters. The reward should be good enough.”

“They’re not here anymore,” Mason replied.

“...What?” I was certain they wouldn’t leave the Girard territory. Where did they go, and why?!

“The divinely blessed hero has appeared. They took a liking to the sisters and forced them to transfer,” he explained.

From what I’d heard, the hero had surpassed humanity’s limits by receiving God’s blessing—and if they accumulated enough experience, they could become even stronger than Rank S adventurers. Nobody knew how the hero came to be, and it wasn’t like there was always one, but when one did appear, they were used by royalty and nobles for politics and wars. Thanks to their absolute strength, they were given a special status by the royal family and, as such, their demands were hard to refuse. Being mere adventurers, the elf sisters must have been forced to accept the invitation.

“It happened at the worst time,” I complained.

“Yeah, can’t agree more. Thanks to that I’ve got a ton of work piling up.” Mason sighed. From how tired he looked, he didn’t seem to be lying. Must be because he had lost capable adventurers that dealt with important jobs.

“So you want to say that you can’t accept Master Jack’s request?” I asked.

If what he had just said was an excuse to refuse, I’d need to reconsider my association with the Adventurer Guild. The reward was plenty, and the enemies were mere lizardmen. I couldn’t approve of monster-slaying specialists fleeing from a fight against opponents that weren’t even that hard to defeat.

“Hey, slow down, Kevin. You’re too hasty.”

“And you’re too relaxed and carefree.”

He had always been like that. Conversations with him tended to stretch. He should think about his conversation partners for once.

“From here on, I’m talking as the guildmaster. I accept the request. Each

participant must get ten silver coins and should earn five more per each lizardman they defeat. It's not much, but it should be barely enough. And, for those who play an active role, they will get to choose one treasure from House Girard. That should do for the reward, but..."

"What's the problem?"

"We don't have enough strong adventurers. We'd need to ask other domains for people who could replace the Verdant Wind."

I wanted to dispatch adventurers as soon as possible, but we couldn't do anything about it if the problem was our region's military strength. "How long will it take?"

"I'll try to have it done in a week."

"...Got it." I thought a week was too long, but from how Mason looked, it seemed he considered even that wouldn't be enough time.

The main reason was the Girard territory's location. The north was surrounded by tall mountains, and the east and west by dense forests. The only connection to other domains was the south. However, not only was the distance to the nearest territory significant, one part of the bridge across the river was damaged. It took two days to get there, so the round trip would take four. Considering that Mason said he would do it in a week, that meant he only had three days to assemble adventurers, which was quite fast.

"I'll consult Master Jack about our next move. Do your best to gather as many adventurers as you can," I said.

"Leave it to me," my old friend answered confidently.

I left the request on the table and exited the Adventurer Guild.

* * *

When I heard Kevin report what had happened at the Adventurer Guild, I panicked. Why? Because he'd mentioned the hero.

In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, the hero was so strong that you couldn't win against them. Meeting them was fatal—they were like the Grim Reaper. They were also quite a pain for taking away the Rank A adventurer

party that I was counting on. I'd love to use my authority as a baron to have the hero executed, but with the royal family backing them, it was possible that I'd be the one that ended up on the chopping block.

"If the lizardmen make their move before we can mobilize adventurers, the village might be annihilated. What should we do?" Kevin asked me as I was worrying about the hero.

I'd love to say "Who cares about that village?" but, while it was nothing compared to the hero, it was a side quest with a bad ending flag nonetheless. Dealing with this improperly would kill me too.

Damn these fangames and their unreasonable difficulty!

"We have to buy time," I said. Sending House Girard's soldiers alone would only end in our crushing defeat. I was using money here, so I at least wanted the adventurers to be the only ones to die. "Deploy soldiers to Third Village and have them make it the strongpoint. I'll go there soon myself."

"You are going too, Master Jack?"

"Of course. There's also the tax evasion matter to deal with."

Their hidden field was treason against me; there was no way I'd forgive that. While I had to save Third Village for my fief to prosper, I didn't have to protect the one responsible for the field's creation.

Well, I'll at least listen to what they have to say, but they're going to be executed anyway.

"There was that too, now that you mention it."

"It's just as important as the other problem. We have to promptly deal with both."

"Indeed. Well then, I shall go give instructions to the soldiers." Kevin bowed and exited the office. With that, our troops' preparations should go smoothly.

"Still, 'The Lizardmen's Counterattack,' huh..." In the game, you just had to click on an icon to start the side quest, so I didn't know how much time actually passed between the beginning of the problem and the fighting. It was just as possible for the lizardmen to start their assault now as it was for them to not

attack even after we had gathered the adventurers.

The game omitted these kinds of details, so from now on there'll be times when my knowledge won't be useful, I mused. I guess that's already the case, though. The hero inviting the Verdant Wind to join them is different from the game too.

That event made me realize that, while I'd written notes on my knowledge of the game, there was a possibility that they'd be useless eventually.

Along with Adele, Kevin, and thirty soldiers with their captain commanding them, I arrived at Third Village. Being a noncombatant, Lumié stayed at the mansion.

The lizardmen still hadn't moved from their base, and the village was almost the same as the last time I visited. The destroyed houses were being demolished before they could be rebuilt. The villagers were busy carrying stones and wood, so it would take a while for them to restore the damaged fields to how they were before.

By the way, the reason the villagers looked rather frightened was because they knew that a monster den was nearby. It wasn't because of me and the soldiers; they actually welcomed us.

"I'm going to see the village chief. Adele, come with me as a guard. As for the others, build fences around the village," I commanded.

"Yes, sir!" the captain, whose name I didn't know, answered as everyone's representative. Then the soldiers started to move quickly to execute my order. They did seem motivated, but from the way they walked, they weren't well-trained.

These lazy asses slacked off on their training...

"Shall we go, Master Jack?" Adele's eyes were sparkling—maybe she was glad to be going with me. From that, I could guess that her affinity was extremely high, which meant she was unlikely to betray me.

She's such an adorable and obedient girl. I'm really glad I saved her. As long as I can maintain her affinity, I should be able to live my luxurious life without a

care. I don't have a grand dream like becoming king, so such a life is satisfying enough for me.

"Yeah, let's go."

The village chief's house was destroyed by monitor lizards too, so he was currently living outside. He had placed his undamaged bed below a tree and made a roof with a cloth to shelter himself from the rain; I had seen a few homeless people live like that in Japan. If I hadn't known about the hidden field, I would have actually felt sorry for him.

The old village chief bowed deeply when I arrived in front of his crude residence. "Lord Girard, we are truly grateful to you for dispatching soldiers to protect our village." He seemed delighted, not knowing what I was currently thinking. I was certain that beneath his respectful veneer, he was actually looking down on me.

We'll see who laughs last.

"You're hiding something from me, right?" I asked, making him stiffen for a second. The way he reacted just like my ex-wife when I found out about her affair pissed me off even more.

"What could you mean? I have nothing to hide from you, Lord Girard."

"Oh, really? So that field in the nearby forest doesn't count?"

"How do you know about that?!" he exclaimed, his face becoming so pale I almost laughed. Because I said it confidently, maybe he thought he couldn't hide it anymore and kneeled, bowing once again. "There is a reason for this! We did not hide it from you because we wanted to live affluently, or anything of the sort!"

And now he was talking like my ex-wife, saying there was a "reason." Well, I could already guess what it was.

"Explain."

"The taxes of the Girard territory are too heavy. Without the field in the forest, we would starve."

See? Always pushing the blame on someone or something else. I could almost

hear my ex-wife say *“I was lonely because you always prioritize work over me!”* and that made me even more irritated.

However, as I was about to announce his execution...

“Just now, you said that Master Jack was in the wrong?” Adele drew her twin blades and trampled on the village chief’s head. She released some bloodlust from her mana, and it was enough to even scare me.

Wait! Why the hell are you acting on your own?! It was supposed to be the scene where I say something cool and execute him!

“I am sorry.”

“What was that?! Muttering like that is disrespectful to Master Jack!” Adele yelled at him for not being able to speak properly, his mouth being pushed against the ground.

Was Adele that kind of character? The difference between how she usually was and now was so big—in a bad way—that it was off-putting.

“Master Jack, I can kill him, right? Yep, should be fine.” She nodded to herself. The look in her eyes as she glanced at me clearly showed that she was on a rampage. “Well then, time to kill!”

“W-Wait!” I shouted, hurriedly embracing her from behind just as she was going to stab the village chief’s back.

“Hya?!” She let out a cute squeak that made it hard to believe she was furious just a second ago. She could be faking it to throw me off guard, though, so I had to stay sharp and not let her go! “N-No, Master Jack! You cannot do that when so many people are looking...”

That’s my line! If people saw her kill someone without my direct order, she’d end up the target of some intense criticism. I’d finally obtained the strongest protector, so I didn’t want her to become the trigger of some internal conflict!

“Just get away from him already!”

“U-Understood.” She stepped away from the village chief, her face flushed—probably because of the excitement.

Because of the near-death experience, the village chief was crying, snot

coming out from his nose. Disgusting.

“P-Please, save me!” he appealed to me.

Due to Adele’s rampage, I didn’t feel like killing him here anymore. However, hiding a field from your lord was punishable by the kingdom’s laws, so I couldn’t let him go scot-free. It wouldn’t wash away my irritation either, so I needed to find another way for him to die.

“You evaded taxes, and yet you want me to save you?”

He really is a shameless guy.

“But we had to do it to survive...”

“I see. To survive, huh?”

Still, that didn’t excuse going against the law. I also found that the taxes were too harsh and lowered them, so I could understand his point. However, crimes should be punished.

“Y-Yes! Exactly!” He nodded happily, misunderstanding my attitude and thinking he was saved.

“Here’s your punishment: you have to participate in the battle against the lizardmen.”

“Huh?”

What a stupid man. I—no, the world itself wasn’t kind enough to protect someone who shirked their duty to pay taxes.

“The kingdom’s laws allow the execution of the ringleader of any tax evasion if they’re malicious. Considering the size of the field and past precedents, the laws apply to your case.”

If you executed everyone involved, the village in question would soon be annihilated, so only the ringleader would die. Instead, they had to pay more taxes—and, of course, I intended to do just that.

“However, I know of your circumstances, so I’m ready to compromise. If you fight against the lizardmen, I’m willing to forgive you.”

“I am truly grateful for this, but as you can see, I am already quite old. I do not

have the strength to fight.”

“You can be a decoy.”

Naturally, I didn’t expect that old man to go fight with a sword. He would only be a hindrance, and wouldn’t even work as a meat shield on his own. At most, he would probably only stop the enemy for a second or two. However, that was completely fine. After all, I wanted him to die.

“P-Please, no!”

“You’d rather be executed right here, conforming to the kingdom’s laws? If I want, I can also kill all your relatives while I’m at it, you know?”

The village chief gasped, speechless.

I was doing my best to compromise even though I didn’t want to forgive a traitor. If he still wasn’t satisfied with that, the only thing left to do was to execute him myself.

Adele pointed her swords at his neck as he reeled from my threat. She usually acted like a cute puppy, but right now she was like a Doberman baring its fangs.

“Don’t be hasty.” I stopped her.

“Yes, sir. I will only kill him once I have your permission, Master Jack.”

“No! The village chief still has some uses, so we’re letting him live!”

My previous words were a threat—I didn’t intend to kill him right here.

Jeez, it’s hard to have a comrade who can’t read the room...

“Understood.”

Don’t be so dejected just because I stopped you! It makes me feel like I did something bad.

“I know you did that for me. Thanks.” I patted her head to comfort her. She closed her eyes with a pleased expression, and her tail hung down languidly, so she was probably relaxing.

With how high her affection was, I had to make her do something else before she went on another rampage. “Can you search around to see if any monsters are hiding nearby?”

“Huh? Are you sure I can leave you alone?”

“I’m not so weak that the village chief can kill me. Monsters are more dangerous. I’m counting on you.”

“Certainly! Leave it to me!” Adele took my hand and enjoyed its sensation against her cheek for a few seconds, then separated from me. Having finally calmed down, she went away into the forest.

The moment she was gone, fatigue suddenly took over my body.

“Er, Lord Girard...” the village chief muttered.

Aaah, yeah. He’s still here. I don’t feel like talking anymore, so let’s wrap this up.

“Go show your hidden field to the tax collector and have him calculate what you owe. After that, rejoin the soldiers and help make fences around the village.”

“Understood... Um, about my role as a decoy...”

“You just need to act as one if the lizardmen come to Third Village. There’s also the possibility that they won’t. In that case, I’ll overlook your crime and let you continue as the village chief.”

“Truly?!” he rejoiced.

Hook, line, and sinker. If he was so reluctant to do his part, I only needed to give him the hope that he would survive if the lizardmen didn’t show up to motivate him.

“You have my word.” I hated betrayal and would never break a promise. If the lizardmen really didn’t come, I’d do as I said, but such a future wasn’t in store. After all, they assaulted the village in the game. Even if some details were different, the overall flow of events was the same as it was in the game. The lizardmen weren’t going to flee or suddenly get all friendly. They’d definitely attack.

“Thank you very much! I will immediately guide the tax collector to the field!” Without even brushing the dirt off his clothes, the village chief dashed away at a speed you wouldn’t think possible for someone his age. He was suddenly

quite lively. I sensed that he had the spine to do anything he needed to survive.

Anyway, I'd finished my work, so I figured that I should probably rest. "Guess it's time for a nap."

I went to the center of the village where there was a tent that could fit around ten people—the temporary headquarters where I would be staying. Inside were a cot, a few chairs, and a table to eat, among a few other things. As we were dealing with monsters instead of humans, there wasn't any real need to make detailed strategies, so it was more like my comfortable personal bedroom instead of a war room.

This is the privilege of being a noble! Totally different from commoners!

I sat on a chair, opened a wine bottle, and drank it whole. Then I lay down on my bed. My subordinates were dealing with the boring bits, so I could just leisurely wait until the time came.

I was drunk in a pleasant way. My head was light and I felt very good.

I closed my eyes. I often slept on a chair when I was in Japan, so even if this world was less advanced, I actually slept more comfortably here.

However, maybe because I was so relaxed, I started to think of things I usually didn't.

Why did I reincarnate inside a fangame?

And...who was I?

No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't come up with an answer. Not wanting to remember my unpleasant past, I let myself drift off to sleep.

* * *

Born as a beastfolk, I lived a life that was full of rejection.

I never grew out of my petite build, and my parents and older brother called me a good-for-nothing.

I thought that I couldn't win with pure strength alone, so I decided to learn dual wielding, which would let me strike twice as often. However, even after becoming strong enough to win all my training matches, my master and the

other disciples said it wouldn't work in real battles.

Of course, at first, I rebelled. Still, the years of being denied and scorned started to change the way I thought. Maybe I really was a powerless woman? After a while, I couldn't help but be convinced of it.

Because of that, even after killing my fellow disciples and my master, running away, and becoming an adventurer, my view didn't change. It was like a curse grasping my heart and never letting go.

"Each of your strikes is too light. It won't work against monsters."

"You're fast, but your swordsmanship is worthless."

"Your dual wielding is no better than a street performance."

Each time I closed my eyes to sleep, words I didn't want to hear echoed in my head. No matter how many achievements I earned as an adventurer, no matter how many monsters I killed, and no matter how many people I saved, these words never disappeared.

So I gave up. That curse would follow me all my life.

After all, nobody truly recognized my strength.

However, recently, my life reached a turning point.

I was given a splendid room inside Master Jack's mansion. It was really wide and even had a closet, a dressing table, a desk, and a chair. I lived a life so luxurious that the past me would never believe it.

Even right now, as I was monitoring the village's surroundings as per Master Jack's order, I was ecstatic that he cherished me. Every day felt better than the last. But that was exactly why, sometimes, I feared that everything was a dream. That, in truth, that lizardman had killed me back then.

I should be working, but I can't help worrying about this! What should I do?!

The best way I found to help myself was to remember my meeting with Master Jack.

The first time we met was when he saved that child from the lizardman. While I couldn't stand men, I thought that I should at least thank him and reluctantly talked to him. Because he looked like he had an aggressive personality, I decided to just give my name and run away, but...

"Adele, huh? It's a good name. I saw you fight from afar. Your swordsmanship was incredible!" he said, raising his arms.

That surprised me. At first, I wasn't even sure I heard him correctly. My swordsmanship was incredible? Impossible.

Even though these were the words I wanted to hear the most, I couldn't help but deny them. But, at the same time, I also wanted to hear more.

"R-Really?" I asked, pushing back the part of me that feared that he might reject me too.

I must have had a pretty anxious expression when I said that. After all, if he didn't reply with what I wanted to hear, the curse would only get stronger.

"Yeah. I only used my binding magic because I thought you'd be able to do something if I made an opening. If you were second-rate, I'd have been too scared to come help."

All my worries were blown away. Knowing that he had trusted me—someone he'd just met—made me unbearably happy. I didn't feel like he was lying either. In fact, for some reason, I sensed that he was convinced that I was strong. Because of that, even though I didn't feel anything when other adventurers told me similar things, my heart throbbed that time. And it still is, even now.

"Thank you...very much..." Before I knew it, I was crying. My feelings exploded and I couldn't control them anymore.

I didn't remember much of the conversation after that—only that he praised me more.

Then, a few days after that, he invited me to his incredible mansion and tried to give me amazing dual blades as thanks. I didn't think I could use them properly and refused, but for some reason, I ended up becoming Master Jack's swordsmanship instructor.

I really didn't understand how it came to this.

Moreover, even though I always had a hard time with pushy men, Master Jack—and only Master Jack—was different.

"I thought I wanted to be like that. Honestly, it was love at first sight."

Once a day, I remembered those words. I couldn't help but be moved by his feelings that were so frank that they made me embarrassed. He was just like a pure child, honestly thinking that he would become stronger if I taught him.

He even made me the instructor for all the soldiers. Thanks to that, more people recognized my worth, but their feelings weren't as strong as Master Jack's. Each time someone praised me, I remembered Master Jack's pure feelings and reaffirmed that he truly was special to me.

And, surely, that would never change.

I wanted to be with Master Jack—the person who recognized me—until my death.

These feelings that I felt for the first time in my life made the cursed words disappear.

As such, I wanted to dedicate my whole life to Master Jack, the man who saved me.

The Girard territory had a lot of enemies, but I would cut them all down with my twin swords.

Even if you threw me away, I'd still live for you, Master Jack. So...please, let me stay with you until my death.

I'll never disappear, and I'll never leave your side.

* * *

"...ack. Ma...ack!" a voice called.

Shut up! I want to sleep, so leave me alone.

I pushed aside the hand that was shaking my shoulder and covered my head with my pillow, totally ignoring the person calling me. However, they didn't give up and continued to shake me.

You've got some nerve to pester your lord like that. Okay, that does it. I'll ignore you no matter what and indulge in indolence!

After this went on for a while, I won the battle of wills and they stopped.

"...If he's not waking up, it should be fine, right?" the person said to themselves and I heard a rubbing sound.

What the hell?! They got in my bed! They had some guts to try attacking me in my sleep. *I'm gonna drill respect into you if I have to!*

I opened my eyes and looked at the intruder's face. "Adele...?"

"Good morning," she said.

Why was she here? She was supposed to be scouting the surroundings. More to the point, why the hell did she get in my bed in her underwear?! I thought she couldn't she stand men?! She might be a *doggirl*, but was she seriously trying to sleep with her master?!



There wasn't a scene like that in the game... No, wait. *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat* did have *some* content rated 15+. I skipped the romance events since I couldn't trust women anymore after my wife's affair, but you'd get a bit of an erotic scene when you maxed out a heroine's affinity.

So maybe, in Adele's case, when her affinity reached max she would slip into Jack's bed and—wait, I shouldn't be analyzing the situation so calmly! As a matter of fact, this was a dangerous situation! If Kevin or some other soldier saw me like this with Adele, their affinity would crater!

In the end, the answer my half-drunk brain came up with after giving its all was rather simple: I got out of bed and sat on a chair.

Good! With this, I should be able to avoid people calling me a scummy lord for flirting with a woman during work—or so I thought for an instant.

"You are getting up already?" Adele asked as she rose from the bed, wearing only black lingerie.

I was wrong to think getting away would be enough! I've got a half-naked woman in here—this is still a "scummy lord" situation!

"Put some clothes on!" I ordered.

"Ah! Excuse me, I forgot." She apologized and got dressed. Over her clothes, she wore the mithril breastplate, boots, and other equipment I gave her to defend against magic.

Fortunately for me, Kevin entered the tent exactly when Adele finished dressing up.

Phew, that was way too close for comfort...

"So this is where you were?" he said.

His tone made it feel like he was blaming me for slacking off, and I didn't like that. "I gave all the necessary instructions already."

"But we do not know when they will attack. You should not drink alcohol in such a situation." He glanced at the wine glass I had left on the table.

The look on his face... He wants to complain. I did what I had to do, so I should

be able to drink if I want to. In the first place, the captain is in charge of giving instructions, so it shouldn't be a problem if I don't do anything!

"The lizardmen are a careful race. We're a new enemy so they're probably still investigating us," I explained.

"You think monsters are *that* intelligent?"

"I do. So if you think they're going to attack us head-on without a plan, you're the one being careless, Kevin." I shut him up using my game knowledge and turned toward Adele. "What did you find?"

"Just a few goblins. I took care of them," she replied.

As expected, the lizardmen used their goblin underlings to gather intel. They were a prudent race in reality, just like they were in the game.

"Good work." I praised Adele, and she approached me, presenting her head.

...She wants me to pat her?

Well, I would need her even more from now on, so I had to make sure she stayed in high spirits. I caressed her crimson hair as I continued my conversation with Kevin. "The goblins Adele killed must have been the lizardmen's scouts. They're investigating our forces."

"...I see. Just as you said, they have a certain intelligence. I will tell the captain to be more thorough when patrolling."

"Good. I'll leave that to you," I said, thinking that he would go away. Instead, he put a bundle of parchment on the table and continued to stare at me. "What is this?" I asked.

"The report on the hidden field. If you could review it, please."

You're working way too fast!

I wanted to take it easy, but that would mean that Kevin's affinity would decrease. I had no other choice but to work.

I continued to pat Adele as I took the report and read it. The tax collector had worked really quickly and had finished examining the whole field. I almost did a double take at his conclusion: if you added the hidden field's crops to the

overall total, the village would owe 1.5 times as much in taxes. Moreover, because it had escaped the notice of the monitor lizards, the field was completely unharmed and would soon be ready for harvest.

They petitioned to not pay taxes because they didn't have enough food when, in fact, they had hidden enough to live without problems. How shameless.

In the game, there were events like people fleeing or revolting if the taxes were too heavy, but I didn't remember anything about tax eva—wait, no, there was something similar: the collusion between the villagers and the tax collector.

In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, the tax collectors were tasked to collect the established amount. If someone didn't pay in time, the tax collectors had the right to make them pay a fine or punish them. Because they had such a big privilege when it came to taxes, if you didn't pay attention to them, they would end up wildly corrupt. Basically, they were a hopeless bunch.

There was only a mention of bribes in the game, but in reality, they must have been paid to say nothing about the hidden field.

It would be bad for the fief if I executed all the villagers, so I had intended to only kill the village chief. Apparently, however, he wasn't the only one who needed to be punished.

"Is there a problem?" Kevin asked, seeing me lost in thought. Even though he had checked the report too, he hadn't noticed the tax collector's betrayal.

"This report was written far too quickly. The tax collector may be corrupt."

"Impossible!" Kevin protested.

"Think about it. With a hidden field of such a size, it should affect the villagers' lifestyles. You think someone as greedy as a tax collector wouldn't notice that?"

Having unpaid taxes would be reflected in the tax collector's results. In my parents' case, they would have had his head—literally.

Anyway, considering how abnormal the Girard territory's taxes were, the tax collector must have been desperate. Maybe he had used the hidden field to balance things out.

“...If he had not, he would have been unfit to be a tax collector,” Kevin replied.

“Exactly.”

If Kevin agreed, that meant my spur-of-the-moment musings weren't incorrect. All that was left was to investigate how much corruption there was.

“I have another question. How many people in the other villages didn't pay their taxes?” I asked.

“Zero...”

That should be impossible. Ninety percent of their crops were being taxed. There should be at least a person or two who couldn't pay. If not, then...

“That means the other villages have large hidden fields too,” I concluded.

Basically, each village had a hidden field to evade taxes and survive. My stupid parents believed the tax collector's reports and thought they were squeezing all they could from the people when, in fact, they were only helping to fatten the guy's pockets. All of this just to worsen their own reputations.

“I won't forgive the traitors.”

Noticing the change in my tone, Adele narrowed her eyes. “People betrayed you? Should I kill them all?”

A few minutes ago I criticized her for running wild, but now? I found her trustworthy. After all, she just proved that she would be merciless to anyone who opposed me.

“We can kill them later. First, we need to figure out the situation.” Even if I was certain that every village was evading taxes, I had no proof. I could force my judgment on them, but that would hurt the people's faith in me. And, considering the current state of the Girard territory, that might lead to a revolt. “Kevin, I entrust you with the investigation. I won't allow anyone who flouted the kingdom's laws to run free any longer.”

“Certainly. As he is in Third Village at the moment, I will begin with the tax collector.”

“Perfect. I'm counting on you.”

With this, the hidden field matter should be settled and I could focus on the lizardmen problem.

“Master Jack!” Ludwig shouted as he entered the tent.

“Ludwig! You’re before Master Jack! Have some manners!” Kevin scolded him, and Ludwig hurriedly kneeled and bowed.

The same thing happened recently. That guy doesn’t learn.

“I-I apologize for my behavior! However, we’re in a state of emergency!”

“What’s happened?” I asked.

“The village chief fled! The captain and another soldier chased after him, but they encountered a lizardman, and the village chief got away during the fight. We don’t know where he is now.”

The chief must have figured that if he was going to die anyway, he might as well bet on the small possibility of survival through escape. That was a major blunder, and the captain needed to be punished.

“What’s the captain doing?”

“He died during the fight against the lizardman.”

...What?! Seriously?! He should have been one of our strongest soldiers, and yet he died in a two-against-one fight?!

“You couldn’t defeat a lizardman even with the captain?”

If that’s the case, I’ll need to change my plan. Damn it, this domain is just so full of problems. If I hadn’t taken my parents’ place, it might already be in ruins by now.

Ludwig didn’t reply. Well, yeah, it wasn’t a very pleasant question to answer. I glanced at Kevin instead.

“Most of the soldiers, the captain included, spend their time playing around instead of training. I suppose he paid for his laziness.”

And...fuck. I stared at the ceiling, my hand on my face.

Because Kevin and Lumié were excellent servants, I had forgotten that, with my stupid parents and their terrible governing, it wouldn’t be weird for the

soldiers to be depraved. In fact, I had just discovered that a tax collector was taking bribes and helping with tax evasion. In comparison, soldiers skipping out on their training was nothing.

That one's totally on me, I reflected. Before focusing on my training with Adele, I should have determined the state of my soldiers and vassals. Wanting to learn dual wielding as soon as possible—to survive in case everyone betrayed me—backfired. I should have at least checked everyone's behavior and skills before coming to Third Village.

"I'm sorry." Ludwig was still bowing. He was trembling, probably afraid that I might lose my temper and throw a fit.

In the game, I could see the affinity of important characters, as well as the loyalty of my subjects and soldiers. Reality, however, didn't have any status screens. As such, I had no idea how far the depravity had spread—or if Ludwig was sincere, or just pretending to get through this situation.

"What's done is done. I won't complain. However, we need someone to replace the captain. Is there anyone suitable, Kevin?"

I tried to see things optimistically; maybe it was a good thing that the incompetent captain was dead. Now, time to think about what comes next. No matter what, a group of monsters led by lizardmen was going to assault this village. Even with the adventurers' help, the soldiers needed someone at their head or they would break apart. Having someone give instructions was really important, so I truly hoped that there would be someone to take the captain's place.

"No."

His short and clear answer immediately ended my optimism—time to give up. House Girard had a shortfall in human resources, and there were no convenient hidden personnel waiting in the wings. That, coupled with the Rank A party the hero stole, made me think about how unlucky I've been since becoming Jack.

Most protagonists get plot armor, but Jack the corrupt aristocrat gets the opposite. Instead of being protected from danger, troubles are constantly drawn to him.

“You think the same, Ludwig?”

“Putting everyone’s motivation aside, nobody has any actual combat experience. Far from being able to give instructions, I think most will have a hard time putting up a proper fight.”

If I could replace them, I would fire them all. Unfortunately, I couldn’t and had to use the cards I was dealt. While I had tons of complaints, I decided to keep them to myself. I had to accept reality and think of a new plan.

“Then I’ll be the one to command the soldiers,” I declared. “Let’s go and see how the construction of the fences is proceeding.”

Kevin might have wanted to object, but I didn’t care. I quickly left the tent and went to where the soldiers were. Adele was with me as a guard, and for some reason, Ludwig and Kevin followed me too.

Just as I had feared, they were chatting instead of working.

“What’s the meaning of this?” I asked Ludwig.

“The captain said to rest before he died, so they’re still following the order.”

“Even though I don’t see a single fence?”

“...Yes, sir.”

They were way too relaxed. If they stayed like that, they might even flee when the monsters showed up. I didn’t have much time, but I had to discipline and train them so that they wouldn’t run away in the face of danger.

“Everyone, in front of me! NOW!” I shouted, making all the soldiers look at me.

They quickly noticed who I was and stood up, forming lines before me. So they could at least do *that* much, huh? And they didn’t look too unmotivated, so the situation wasn’t as bad as I had imagined. However, considering the approaching danger, they were useless if they were weak.

“First, the bad news. Your captain...” I trailed off.

Wait, what’s his name? Shit, I don’t remember.

“It’s Gleon, sir,” Ludwig whispered.

Great! See? You can be tactful when you want!

“Gleon died, fighting bravely against a lizardman.” The soldiers were flustered at this, but I ignored them and continued. “So, in place of Gleon, who was forced to leave us without being able to perform his duty, I’ll take temporary command!”

The soldiers were even more flustered than when they heard of Gleon’s death. They even had the nerve to whisper to each other in front of their lord.

How cocky. Okay, it’s decided, I’m gonna train you very hard.

“From now on, you’ll be divided into two groups: one will make the fences, and one will do combat training. You’ll alternate groups each morning and afternoon. Don’t even think about slacking off!”

They stopped talking and looked at me. I thought they were all slovenly and would complain about me being too harsh, but instead they were all staring at me with sparkling eyes. Their unexpected reaction bewildered me.

Weren’t they just a bunch of slackers? Did I misunderstand something?

“How will the groups be decided?” Ludwig asked.

Naturally, I couldn’t just decide at random. “I leave that to you. You have ten minutes.”

“Huh? What? Me...? Er, I mean, me, sir?”

“Yeah, you. I appoint you as my assistant. Once you’ve selected the ones who’ll start with the combat training, come to my tent.” My orders given, I left.

You might think I just randomly appointed him, but that wasn’t the case. I chose Ludwig because he didn’t have the guts to betray me. He was a better choice than the other soldiers, whose names I didn’t even know, or Kevin, whose thoughts were a mystery to me. It was basically just process of elimination, but it should be enough to overcome the current situation.

I arrived in front of my tent and turned toward Adele, who had followed me as my guard. “Could you train my soldiers?”

“You want me to do it?” she replied hesitantly.

“Yeah. You’re the only one I can count on!”

“I’m the only one!” she rejoiced. “Indeed, I am the only one who can do it. Understood, I will do my best and train them for you, Master Jack!” The way her tail swayed left and right showed how happy she was. She really was like a dog.

“Also, we have healing potions.”

Just like every game, this world had healing items too. Potions were made by alchemists—who had their personal recipes—and could heal wounds in an instant. Their potency was classed in five grades. The strongest of these, the first-grade potions, could restore amputated limbs, but even a baron couldn’t easily get them. Heck, even using every means at my disposal, the best I could procure—and that was if I was lucky—were third-grade potions that could restore internal organs.

In this case, I had fifth-grade potions, and they were enough to completely heal simple bruises. I would have preferred to supply my soldiers with fourth-grade potions against the lizardmen, as they could even heal deep wounds—but I only managed to procure one, which I kept for myself.

“So you can beat them down without any worry. I’m counting on you.”

“Yes!” she answered cheerfully.

Then I looked over at Kevin, who had been waiting behind us silently. “Don’t just stand here doing nothing! Go arrest the tax collector and squeeze as much intel from him as you can!”

“Understood.” He bowed and left.

We already knew from circumstantial evidence that the tax collector was guilty. The question now was: who was the ringleader, him or the village chief?

For Kevin, the butler in charge of many affairs, interrogating a man whose only job was to collect taxes should be easy.

Meanwhile, I had to do my best to train the soldiers who were going to be very important to avert the upcoming bad ending flag.

* * *

As ordered by Master Jack, I captured the tax collector, found a building that

wasn't totally destroyed, and threw him onto the floor inside. Because his limbs were bound, he couldn't cushion his fall and hit his face, making him groan in pain.

"Sir Kevin! Why are you treating me like this?!"

The man before me had amassed quite a fortune in a single generation. If I remembered correctly, he had divorced once and had never had any children. I had employed him because he could read and do arithmetic—what nerve to participate in tax evasion. I could turn a blind eye to small bribes, but hiding a large field was an entirely different story. It was an act of treachery against House Girard and the Valzzan royal family, as well as a felony under the kingdom's laws.

I grabbed his collar and leaned in until my face was just in front of his. "You've known about Third Village's hidden field the entire time, haven't you?"

He gasped, too incompetent to be able to conceal his surprise.

If you're that scared of this level of threat, you should never have participated in this tax evasion plan.

"It's useless to try to hide it. The village chief told us everything. Also, the truth will come out once we investigate the other villages." I was bluffing, but if I needed testimonies, I could simply make the other village chiefs talk by saying that would lessen their crime. If I made it so that the ringleader was the tax collector and the village chiefs were only victims, Master Jack should forgive them. The villages were impoverished enough because of the heavy taxes—I couldn't let their burdens grow even more.

I'll have you become the cornerstone of House Girard's prosperity.

"W-Wait! They were the ones who suggested it! They begged me, saying they would die otherwise! Anyone would agree to it in that sort of situation!"

He didn't seem to be lying, but that wasn't the whole truth either. There was no way that someone who prioritized money over people's lives would do something for free. He should be receiving a hefty amount in bribes.

"How much did you get as compensation?"

“I only received around ten silver coins—gah!”

Hearing his obvious lie, I kicked him at full power in the stomach, sending him flying against the wall. Maybe I overdid it, as he almost fainted.

I grabbed him by his hair and made him stand. “You think you can fool me because I’m old? I might not look like it, but I killed quite a few enemies on the battlefield. I even tortured some. Do you want me to demonstrate my skills?” I lightly clutched his throat.

“Please! I will do anything!” he pleaded.

How pathetic. He was already broken.

“Then answer my questions. You already knew about the hidden field, right?”

“Y-Yes! There is one in every village!”

“How much did you receive as compensation?”

“Half of the crops harvested from the hidden fields!”

I asked when he had started, and from his reply, I figured he must have earned at least a hundred and some gold coins.

What a greedy, foolish, and sinful man.

“Then you’re the one who proposed that they evade their taxes, and asked for compensation for your trouble?”

“Huh? No, I did not—gah!”

I let go of his throat and punched him in the stomach to make him shut up. I didn’t care about the truth. As long as it was convenient for the Girard territory, I didn’t care who died. He should be glad that I didn’t torture him for his embezzlement.

“I’ll ask again. You’re the one who proposed that they evade their taxes, and asked for compensation for your trouble, right?”

He vomited some blood as he nodded. Maybe I’d punctured an organ.

Should be enough to work as a confession.

“Then I’ll document everything you’ve said, and you’ll sign to show that you

confirm its veracity.”

I took out a piece of parchment and wrote that he was the one who had planned the tax evasion, and that the villagers were only victims. Then, at the end, I had him sign it. All that was left was to hear about his partners in crime and I wouldn't need him anymore.

Parasites like him were unnecessary to the new House Girard. I had to find them and dispose of them, no matter what.

Chapter 4: Lesser Earth Dragon

After leaving the troublesome work to Kevin, I took out a chair from the tent and reclined with some black tea while watching the soldiers train.

A little ways away, Adele was beating up some soldiers who were holding wooden swords. Because I heard that they spent their time slacking off and playing around, I thought they would complain about the harsh training—surprisingly, however, they were fighting with all their might.

Why were they so motivated? As the temporary commander, I should be happy about it, but not knowing what they were thinking was kind of scary.

Feudal lords had absolute authority over their domains thanks to their private armies. So maybe I should stay in command even after overcoming this emergency. That way my position would be even more stable.

“Stand up!” Adele yelled.

All the soldiers of the training group were lying on the ground. Meanwhile, Adele was still standing, not tired in the slightest. She was so overwhelmingly strong that I almost reconsidered my plan; instead of staying in command of the soldiers, I should just do my best to keep Adele’s affinity up.

“You’re not going to be useful to Master Jack if you’re that weak! You need more guts! Show me you want to win even at the risk of your lives!” she scolded them.

The soldiers tried to get up, but their limbs were trembling so much that they couldn’t. They had reached their limits. Since our time before the upcoming battle was limited, I considered ordering them to stand up, but I didn’t. They had to rest a little or they would lose efficiency.

“Master, can you train me now?” I said instead.

“Of course! I am always available for you, Master Jack!” Her smile was so pure and cheerful that you wouldn’t believe she was yelling a few minutes ago. She was in cute puppy mode.

I picked up two wooden swords from the soldiers on the ground and took a stance. "Here I come."

I drew near Adele and swung my swords at her, but she parried them both with only one of hers. She was so fast that I couldn't see her move. My kinetic vision was still insufficient.

I reaffirmed how strong she was and decided to go all out. I released the mana accumulated in the organs in my forehead, chest, and abdomen and strengthened my physical abilities.

"It is my turn now. Allow me to see how strong you have become!" Adele approached me, and this time, I could clearly see her.

I used the wooden sword in my left hand to ward off her strike and swung my right one toward her side. However, just when I thought I was going to hit her, she stepped back. I tried to pursue, but stopped when I felt the tip of a sword on my forehead. Adele had beaten me to the punch.

"...Looks like I lost," I said.

I had released all my mana, yet Adele probably had only used one of her own mana organs. The difference in our abilities was still far too wide. I needed to become stronger to break the bad ending flags, so I didn't intend to give up. I had to believe in my potential and continue to endeavor in training.

"I'm still far from your level."

"The fact that you can already move like this when you only started to train recently is amazing. I am truly surprised."

"If someone like you is praising me, I guess I can be a little more confident in myself."

I had been training with Adele for a while now, so I was aware I was becoming stronger, but it was different to hear it directly from her. It seemed that I'd gotten even stronger than I'd thought. I wouldn't end up as the strongest character, but at this rate I may still become pretty tough.

I can still grow. It's been so long since I've felt so happy about something.

Enjoying the sensation, I asked Adele for a few more training matches. After

the end of each fight, she told me what I did wrong and I corrected it in the following session. At first, we finished in a few moves, but each new match became longer and more intense.

“Haa, haa, haa...” I panted, sprawled out on the ground. My stamina had reached its limit. My whole body was drenched in sweat, and my muscles were so tired that I couldn’t move. I had also used all of my mana, so that marked the end of today’s training.

“You did great. You should rest now.”

I looked up at Adele, and saw she was hardly sweating at all. I guessed that she was moving so efficiently that she only used the bare minimum of strength required.

“So you only intend to watch?” she said to the resting soldiers, inciting them.

“Our lord trained so much that he can’t move.”

“We can’t lose to him!”

“We have our pride!”

Their eyes were full of determination. One after another, they stood up and attacked Adele with their wooden swords. Naturally, she avoided them and counterattacked each time, but they got up and tried again and again.

Seeing me train inspired and motivated them. I can use that.

I’d thought that the fight against the lizardmen would be hopeless, but if they were ready to fight to the death, we might be able to resist until the adventurers arrived, even if they were late.

“It seems everyone is doing their best,” Kevin said, standing next to me. I couldn’t see his expression clearly from below, but from his voice, he seemed delighted.

“You finished your work?”

“Yes. Here is a summary of the tax collector’s testimony.”

I accepted the piece of parchment without getting up. Apparently, the man had instructed every single village to have hidden fields so that he could fatten

his own pockets. That was a serious crime.

“Is that the truth?” I asked.

“I only wrote what he recognized as being true.”

That was a weird way to say it—almost made me wonder if Kevin had in fact been the one to instruct the villages to plant crops in secret. However, if the game was anything to go by, he was innocent. Same for Lumié—they both hated unfair frauds. It was exactly because they had a strong sense of justice that they betrayed Jack in the end.

The world never goes as you want.

“Got it. What sort of punishment do you think is suitable?”

“I think the tax collector should be executed and his assets forfeited. For everyone else, we can just increase their taxes.”

“Then we’ll do that once we’re done with the lizardmen.”

The traitor would die, and my fortune would grow. That would be a winning situation for me, so I agreed with Kevin’s decision.

When I first set out for Third Village, I had thought that I would just laze around drinking wine, but in the end, I was training even more fervently than the soldiers. Moreover, when I couldn’t move anymore, Kevin would carry me to my tent and force me to go through desk work. It was a terrible environment. His eyes seemed to say “Your body might be tired but not your head, no?” as he stood next to me.

Could he be a demon? Yes, he’s gotta be!

Shooting him a protesting glance would be useless as he would just ignore me, so I read the document in my hands instead. It was a scouting report of Third Village’s surroundings. Currently, I had soldiers patrolling in alternating groups of five around the forest, on the lookout for the lizardmen. I also had someone go survey the monsters’ base next to the lake, and there wasn’t any strange movement for now. They were still preparing for the battle.

If the monsters didn’t make their move, I would like to make mine. That way

we could decrease their number and I could get some actual combat experience. I had learned to fight calmly during training, but I wouldn't survive long if I couldn't remain just as calm in life-and-death situations.

"I'll join today's patrol. If we encounter any monsters, I'll fight them," I said.

"That would be too dangerous. Will you not reconsider?"

No way. I needed the strength to eliminate my enemies if I wanted to live in luxury. Adele might be the strongest, but she wasn't invincible. Being surrounded by powerful people wasn't enough. Also, I didn't like to rely too much on others. I wanted to at least be strong enough to be able to survive on my own.

"Hard pass." I stood up, not tired anymore, and looked at Kevin. "While I'm away, you're the one in command. Defend Third Village no matter what." I was a little bothered by his dissatisfaction, but right now, becoming stronger was more important.

I exited the tent, gathered some soldiers, and set out for the forest. Adele was worried about my safety, so I allowed her to accompany us on the condition that she could only intervene if I were in mortal danger.

* * *

The forest was quiet. There was plenty of light because the canopy had been periodically thinned over the years, and the air felt refreshingly clear. We hadn't run into any boars or deer so far, though, so the lizardmen had probably eaten them—and done a number on the animal population in the process. The Girard territory was a rural domain without any specialties, so we had to at least protect its flora and fauna.

Anyway, as we were walking along a small path toward the lake where the monsters were supposed to be, one of the soldiers spoke. "This is where the captain fought that lizardman."

There wasn't a body, as it had been taken back to Third Village and buried.

"I found footprints. They seem recent, so we can use them for our patrol," another soldier affirmed, touching the ground. He had presented himself as the son of a hunter, so he must have been used to this sort of thing.

“Brace yourselves,” I said, drawing my Twin Hydra Blades.

From this point on, we could encounter monsters at any moment, so we had to proceed carefully. We moved in line with the hunter’s son first, followed by Adele, me, and the other three soldiers.

After walking for a few minutes, we caught sight of a single goblin. The vanguard glanced at me, waiting for my decision.

“You wait here.”

It was pretty stupid for the commander to go fight alone, but I couldn’t miss the opportunity to have a one-on-one battle. I told everyone to stay quiet with my gaze and tightened my grip around the hilts of my swords. My hands felt slightly sweaty from the tension.

I released the mana from the mana-storing organ in my abdomen and enhanced my physical abilities before brazenly striding toward the goblin.

“Gya gya!” Noticing me, it laughed and attacked with its club.

Move just like in your training, I repeated to myself on a loop as I warded off the club with my left sword, and pierced through the goblin’s chest with my right one. Then I kicked it in the stomach, sending it flying away, before taking some distance. I didn’t let my guard down.

I was prepared to attack it again as soon as it got up, but...it didn’t end up moving at all.

“I...won?”

It was so freaking weak! It was my first true battle, so I didn’t think I would win so easily.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of footsteps on grass, so I turned toward it and found four new goblins.

“I’ll take care of them too!” I wanted to know if I’d won by skill, or if I had just been lucky.

Let’s see how far I can go with just my dual-wielding skills. No magic!

I closed in on one of them as they were distracted by the corpse of their

fellow goblin. It must have been taken by surprise as it didn't even try to avoid my strike, and I split its head right down the middle.

Two of the other goblins thrust their wooden swords at me, so I stepped back to avoid them before returning them in kind with my Twin Hydra Blades. Their skulls weren't hard, and I didn't feel any resistance as I penetrated their heads.

The remaining goblin turned its back to me and tried to run away, so I threw my left sword at it, piercing its back.

"Die!" I quickly caught up to it and swung my right blade horizontally, decapitating it. I even had the time to step back to avoid the spurt of blood.

"Splendid, Master Jack!" Adele exclaimed with a cute puppy smile.

As for the soldiers, their mouths were agape, astonished by my strength.

Ha ha ha! It seems I have no problems with actual fighting.

"All right, let's go toward the lake." I figured that I had a few more fights left in me, based on that performance. I had to build up combat experience before the lizardmen's assault—and to prepare for the future.

Nobody objected, so we returned to the previous formation and continued our march. I was in quite high spirits, eager to fight more. However, aside from the goblins, we didn't encounter any monsters until we reached our destination.

The lake was far wider than I had expected, to the point that we couldn't even see land on the horizon. It felt like a nice place to go out on a boat and fish. I approached the water and looked down. I could clearly see pebbles through it, and it seemed to be shallow for quite a ways out. The wind was kicking up some gentle waves. Honestly, it looked like the perfect place to spread a blanket and take a nap.

"We've come this far. Might as well keep going until we hit the lizardmen's base."

It was important to examine the enemy's position, and I wanted to see their camp directly. Adele was with me, so even if we were discovered, we should be able to flee.

“Understood. I will guide you there,” the hunter’s son said, and we followed after him. Seeing how he wasn’t following a trail and was only paying close attention to our surroundings, he must have already been familiar with this area.

We’d walked through the forest for about ten minutes when the vanguard suddenly stopped. “We have arrived.”

I stayed hidden behind a tree and examined the clearing up ahead filled with monsters. Just like in the game’s side quest, there were lizardmen, goblins, and monitor lizards. The numbers seemed to line up with the game as well. As I thought, this world was based on *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. Still, I couldn’t rest on my laurels, considering the events that weren’t depicted in the game like the hidden fields or the tax collector’s fraud.

“I wonder what they are building?” Hearing Adele’s words, I focused on what the goblins were doing: shaving wood with old knives. If it was like in the game, I knew what was going on.

“They’re making equipment. Look, that one resembles a shield, no?”

“It does... And the sticks on the ground look like swords. You must be right. I would expect no less from you, Master Jack!” Adele looked at me with sparkling eyes.

I only knew because in the game, the goblins used weapons made of wood and stones, not being able to process metal. As for the knives, they either had found them somewhere or had borrowed them from the lizardmen. I didn’t deserve the praise.

“I don’t see anything unusual. I guess they won’t go on the offensive for a while.” They were still making their equipment, so we should have at least a few days before the attack. “We’ve got the intel I wanted. Let’s go back.”

While I would’ve liked some more combat experience, I didn’t intend to fight so many monsters at once. I had turned to walk away when, suddenly, I heard thunderous stomping behind us. I detected a huge amount of mana, and had a very bad feeling.

“L-Look...” the soldier next to me blurted out with a pale face, pointing at

where I had just been looking.

I turned my head back and checked what was happening. “A lesser earth dragon!”

Lesser earth dragons were basically giant bipedal lizards. They were the lowest rank of dragon, didn’t have wings, and weren’t able to use breath attacks—but their fangs and the claws of their small forelimbs could pierce through iron like it was paper. Their long, thick tails were also dangerous. They could use them like whips to send numerous people flying at once, making it difficult to fight them even by surrounding them. Moreover, the green scales covering their whole bodies were hard enough to easily repel the kinds of swords or spears that common soldiers used. The only way to hurt them was to aim for their eyes, the insides of their mouths, or their bellies—basically, their soft parts. As such, they had very few weaknesses.

In other words, this wasn’t a fight we could win. “Let’s run away.”

It was most likely going to annihilate the monsters, lizardmen and all. It hadn’t noticed us yet, so we should have enough time to flee and prepare a countermeasure. It was impossible to win with just my private army, so I’d have to ask for reinforcements from the kingdom and—

“Please, wait. Something is strange.” Still calm even in front of a powerful monster, Adele had noticed something unusual. “Look, there is a collar around its neck.”

On second look, the lesser earth dragon was indeed wearing a collar. Attached to the collar was a chain, which was currently being pulled by a dozen lizardmen to restrain the creature.

I then noticed someone not far from the dragon. Because they were wearing a hooded cloak, hiding their face and figure, I couldn’t distinguish their sex. A lizardman was handing them a big leather bag filled to the brim, and next to them was the chief of Third Village, lying on the ground.

“They’re striking a deal with the lizardmen?” I exclaimed, even while I was thinking about how impossible it should be. However, reality always surpassed my expectations. In a bad way.

“I think you are right. Upon closer examination, some of the dragon’s scales are peeled off, and I can see dry blood. It was probably captured, and is now forced to obey because of the collar.”

A slave collar for monsters? Well, monster tamers existed in the game, so it wouldn’t be weird for there to be magic items that could control monsters. However, capturing a lesser earth dragon was far from easy. I was certain even hundreds of lizardmen couldn’t manage it, which left one other possibility: the person dealing with them. In which case, they must be incredibly strong. Also, there was a high chance they were hostile.

“That’s enough intel. Let’s run.”

Thank god we learned about it ahead of time. There’s not much we can do about it, but at least I can rethink our defense. This world has just given me one problem after another, ever since I got here, I thought, troubled, as we left.

The instant we got back to Third Village, I went into my tent and checked my notes on the game. No matter how many times I reread them, I didn’t find any mention of a lesser earth dragon in the lizardmen quest. In the first place, there was no way I would forget the appearance of such a powerful monster, so that meant it was a completely unknown element to me.

There were so many people who could be responsible for this that I couldn’t narrow down the list. It could be one of the people who had been oppressed, a merchant who had been bankrupted, an opposing noble, heretics, or even the royal family of the Valzza Kingdom.

I played *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat* a lot, taking notes and analyzing them each time Jack died, so even now, I remembered most scenarios. *Most*. Not all. I never looked at any guides or walkthroughs, after all, so it was entirely possible that I missed some side quests.

Presuming my knowledge of the game was insufficient, it was dangerous to rely too much on my notes, and I should make my move now. A problem that wasn’t in the game could only be overcome with a solution that didn’t exist in the game.

“I have to act if I want to survive.”

Collecting my thoughts helped to clear my mind and calm me down.

I exited my tent and glanced at Adele, who was training the soldiers. I was surprised that, even though we had discovered the existence of a lesser earth dragon, they decided to continue their harsh training instead of fleeing. I had been ready to fight it with only Adele at my side, so I was relieved.

“Master Jack!” Adele bowed, noticing me.

I raised my hand and replied, “Stop the training. We’re going to make a trap.”

Even with the adventurers’ help, there was a high chance that Third Village would be annihilated. In that case, it was pointless to fight head-on. If the monsters came at us with overwhelming strength, then we would oppose them with the wisdom of humanity.

“Gather the villagers and have them help dig a big pit at the center of the village. Ludwig, you’re in command. Have it done as soon as possible.”

“Understood!” He saluted, hand on his chest, and ran to execute my order.

Next, I turned toward Adele. “Watch over the lizardmen. If they show any sign of approaching the village, light a fire and return. We’ll fight together!”

“I would do anything for you, Master Jack! I will do my best!”

“It’s a dangerous job that I can only entrust to you. Don’t die,” I said, putting my hands on her shoulders. This made her look at me with those sparkling eyes again. I figured that should be enough to motivate her to not slack off on surveillance.

Done with giving instructions here, I went to where the fences were being made to talk to Kevin. As expected, he was giving directions.

“This part is too fragile—remake it! You’re making these fences to protect our precious territory, so don’t cut corners!” he shouted with a terrifying voice, like a demonic drill sergeant.

The soldiers were too scared to complain and promptly followed the instructions. In the game’s documents, it was written that he had been on the battlefield many times, so he must have been used to this sort of thing. In fact, maybe he was more suited to being a commander than a butler.

“There’s something I want to talk about,” I called out to him, and he stopped yelling at the soldiers.

He slowly turned toward me and asked, “Yes, what is it?” Kevin seemed a little cautious, maybe because he was thinking I was bringing more bad news. Thankfully, something as bad as having to fight against a lesser earth dragon didn’t happen that often, so he should relax a little.

“Stop making fences. I want them to do something else.”

“We have only surrounded half of the village, though?”

Even after a few days of work, only the side of the village facing the forest had fences raised. I had planned for the village to be completely fenced in, but I decided it wasn’t worth continuing.

“Fences aren’t going to help against a lesser earth dragon. It’ll just blow them away. Making more of them is a waste of time.”

“But it might help to slow it down a little...”

“It won’t. I have another plan and I want people to work on it.”

“You do? What kind of plan?” he asked dubiously.

I told him my strategy. At first, his expression implied that he was against it, but after hearing the whole thing, his demeanor changed to acceptance. “I see... Indeed, this might work.”

“Right? We may even be able to win without the adventurers’ help.”

“However, this is too dangerous for you, Master Jack. I should be the one to act as a decoy to—”

“No, your stamina wouldn’t hold, and none of the soldiers are up to the task. I’m the only one who can do it.”

“...Indeed, it is as you say.” His face scrunched in vexation, unable to refute me. Maybe he was resenting his aged and weakened body? “If the patriarch of House Girard is going to fight, not minding the danger to his person, then we shall make the preparations in time at any cost.”

“I leave the direct management to you.”

“Certainly. I shall perform my duty flawlessly,” he said confidently, and he started to give the soldiers their new orders.

That wrapped up everything I could prepare as a countermeasure. If the lizardmen attacked earlier than anticipated, then we wouldn’t be able to avoid a crushing defeat. In that case, I would have to give up on a luxurious life and run away.

However, I didn’t think that was likely to happen. Even with that collar, I didn’t think that taming a lesser earth dragon could be done so quickly. Even if their training went well, we should still have a few peaceful days left.

After sending a letter about the lesser earth dragon to the Adventurer Guild, I also went to help dig the pit. If I just lazed around abusing my privileges as the baron, and the trap wasn’t finished in time, I’d definitely regret it. Also, I didn’t want to entrust my fate to other people. It was because I didn’t know who would betray me that I had to break the bad ending flags with my own strength.

* * *

Four days later, we were still digging the pit. Once we were done, it should be around seven meters deep and ten meters in diameter.

“Lord Girard! It’s almost time for our shift change!” a villager said.

Already? Digging a hole wasn’t the only thing I had to do, so I threw away my digging tools, seized the dangling rope, and climbed. Once out of the hole, Ludwig offered me a waterskin.

“Great work, sir.”

I raised my hand lightly in response, took the waterskin, and drank. Fruit juice must have been added to it because it had a faintly sweet taste. It spread through my tired body, and I felt like I was indulging in the greatest of luxuries..

“We’re almost done,” Ludwig muttered, looking at the pit. He was the site foreman.

We’d kept a decent pace, considering we were almost finished.

“Yeah, it shouldn’t take much longer. I’m going to see Kevin and the rest.”

I had ordered the soldiers to fill big barrels with water. The plan was to throw them in the pit after the lesser earth dragon fell into it. If we were lucky, we might be able to drown it.

“Shouldn’t you rest a little, sir?”

“Adele could light her signal any moment now. I can’t rest until we’re done with the preparations.”

That was why people used to peace were troublesome. With death being imminent, I had no other choice but to work hard.

I threw him back the waterskin and went to where the soldiers were. They’d filled many barrels and lined them up already—enough to fill half the pit.

“You’re done?” I asked Kevin. He had been the one giving directions.

“Yes, we just finished.”

“It went faster than I thought.”

“Everyone was motivated. It was easy to gather barrels from the whole domain.”

Maybe it was because they wanted to protect their homeland, but morale was strangely high. I could feel everyone’s strong determination to fight and win.

“I’ll do the finishing touches. Let the soldiers rest for a while.”

Kevin nodded and was going to relay my orders to the soldiers, but he stopped when he noticed someone approaching on a horse.

“It seems to be an adventurer.” Kevin stood in front of me and the horse stopped before him.

The adventurer dismounted. “Are you Sir Kevin?”

“I am.”

“I have a message from Guildmaster Mason. Adventurers will arrive in Third Village in the evening, in two days’ time.”

Finally, the good news I had been waiting for. Even if there were no Rank A people around, there should be a lot of Rank C and D adventurers. It was a

reassuring fighting force to have.

“We’ll deal with the lesser earth dragon and leave the small fry to you,” Kevin answered.

As he just said, we would leave the lizardmen, goblins, and monitor lizards to the adventurers. Not having the money, we couldn’t change the particulars of the original request. We were the ones risking our lives against the big monster, but it would be worth it in the end. After all, that would mean that the materials we could get from its corpse would be House Girard’s, which was an opportunity to improve our financial affairs.

“You can count on us,” the adventurer replied, then looked around. “Have you decided on a strategy?”

“We’ll divide into two groups and stand on the flanks of the fences. Baron Girard will be in charge of the front,” Kevin answered.

The lizardmen were going to attack us from the forest, and were most likely going to use the lesser earth dragon to break the fences. We couldn’t leave it to the adventurers, so we had to be the ones waiting there. Once the dragon made it through, the lizardmen would start their assault, and the adventurers would take them in a pincer attack and exterminate them. That was the plan.

“Baron Girard will be in command?”

His question was natural. Usually, nobles watched the fighting from afar, in a safe place. However, I couldn’t lounge around and drink even if I wanted to. The circumstances demanded that I pitch in.

“The captain was killed by a lizardman, so I’m the only one who can,” I said.

The adventurer didn’t expect me to cut into the conversation and looked at me, surprised. “...That is quite unfortunate. I will pray for your victory.”

From the look full of pity he was giving me, I could guess he thought I would be killed by the lesser earth dragon.

Don’t underestimate me. There’s no way I would go without a plan.

“You don’t need to pray. You just need to perform your duty.”

“Certainly. I will make the preparations, then.” He must have understood that

I was looking down on him because he was slightly discontent when he replied.

Well, not that I minded. He wasn't my vassal, so I didn't need to pay attention to him. As long as he worked for the money I paid, I didn't care if he died.

In the morning two days after the adventurers' arrival, smoke rose from the forest. It was the signal from Adele indicating that the monsters had made their move.

Finally, the side quest "The Lizardmen's Counterattack" had begun.

"Everyone, take your positions!" I shouted.

House Girard's soldiers quickly moved, positioning themselves to the flanks of the fences at the center, with weapons and stones in their hands.

The villagers had been evacuated to a hill overlooking the whole village, along with food and water. It was the same hill from which I'd originally spied Adele. We could have made them take refuge in the church, but that would be a poor decision considering that the lesser earth dragon could destroy it easily. It was safer to have them stay somewhere where they could flee just by running.

But, more than anything, I wanted them to see us risking our lives fighting for them. That way, when they see us win, they would feel glad to have paid taxes. They had to understand that their lord wasn't just squeezing money from them, but also doing his duty by protecting them. Even if they were living in poverty, knowing that they were protected would make them have more faith in me, leading to fewer chances of being betrayed.

"Master Girard! They are coming!" a soldier yelled.

I could see birds flying away from the forest. They must have sensed the lizardmen's hostility.

As for Adele, she was probably on her way back, but because she had to be careful not to be spotted, she might not make it in time.

I was tense. My throat was dry, and my hands were sweaty. I wasn't sure how long we waited, but finally, I heard the ground quake and trees crash to the ground. The lesser earth dragon was running toward us.

If only he could kill the lizardmen and go away, I couldn't help but think. *No, that's cowardice*. I psyched myself up by slapping my cheeks.

The next instant, the lesser earth dragon came out of the forest. It was still wearing the collar with a chain, but this time, only a single lizardman was holding it. That meant they had completely tamed it. It stopped around a kilometer away from the village and roared. The air itself trembled, stirring up fear inside us all. The soldiers, though grimacing, didn't lose their will to fight. Some of the adventurers, on the other hand...

"I-It's impossible to win against that! The baron's soldiers are gonna lose!"

Around ten adventurers from the fifty who had come as reinforcements ran away.

What kind of monster-slaying specialist succumbs to fear?!

A stern adventurer—Mason, the guildmaster—tried to stop them, but to no avail. It might have been an inevitable outcome, considering they were just random adventurers he'd quickly assembled, but I would never forgive them.

"The adventurers who escaped will not need to be paid. I shall negotiate with the guild after this," Kevin said, then rolled his arm a few times before taking up his bow. As an old soldier, he may have been getting excited by the situation as, even faced with the lesser earth dragon, his fighting spirit didn't wither one bit. In fact, his attitude showed how confident he was in our victory.

So you get it, I thought, naturally smiling from seeing him prepare to fight for me. If everyone did as planned, our victory was certain, and the deserters would be sanctioned. There wasn't a need to flee.

"Of course, traitors need to be punished."

Just after I spoke, the lizardman let go of the chain it was holding. Now free, the lesser earth dragon ran toward us, with goblins following it a few hundred meters behind. Just as I had expected, they wanted to make the dragon destroy the fences before launching their attack. Its power allowed them to avoid having to use tricks to get in.

"How naive. Even if they have some intelligence, it only amounts to that, I guess." I couldn't be spineless in front of the soldiers, or they would get scared

in turn. “We’re going as planned! Watch me!”

The soldiers before me parted left and right, and I went to the front. It might be stupid for a feudal lord to be on the front line, but we couldn’t win if I wasn’t reckless. In the first place, I *was* the game’s protagonist. Of course I would fight.

The lesser earth dragon drew closer, little by little. Five hundred meters... Four hundred... Three hundred... Two hundred... One hundred... Fifty.

“Shadow Bind.”

My shadow stretched and coiled itself around the lesser earth dragon’s right leg. Though I couldn’t capture its whole body, I could at least bind one leg by pouring enough mana into my spell. When it tried to step forward, it lost its balance and fell on its side.

“Attack!” I shouted, my voice echoing around the battlefield.

Kevin and the soldiers fired arrows and threw stones at the monster, aiming for its eyes and belly, but they missed because it was struggling and trying to get back up.

Well, at least I had stopped its charge.

“Stop! I’m moving in!” I made the soldiers stop their attacks, climbed over the fences, and ran forward on my own. Ordinary soldiers would be killed if they accompanied me, so it was better to fight alone.

Before the lesser earth dragon could stand, I released my mana to increase my physical abilities, jumped, and struck it with my Twin Hydra Blades. However, my swords were repelled with a blunt sound. I *did* damage one of its scales, but I didn’t reach its flesh. What’s more, my arms were numb now, so I wouldn’t be able to attack it for a while.

My physical strength and skills weren’t enough to break through its scales. I wanted to aim for its soft parts, but doing so would leave me clearly visible and prone to counterattack. To get close enough, I needed to create an opening in its guard.

As I was worrying about how to proceed, the lesser earth dragon finally stood up. It was around five meters tall, so I had to look up. It was glaring at me,

probably angry that I had attacked it. It opened its jaw and tried to bite me, so I leaped to the right to avoid it. It then struck at me with its claws, which I warded off with my twin blades, but I ended up losing my balance.

I stopped moving.

For an instant, it looked like the damn lizard smiled—then it spun around to whip me with its tail. It seemed far more dangerous than being hit by a truck, so if it actually hit me it would most likely destroy my body and blow me away. I forced myself to crouch with a yell, somehow managing to avoid the blow as its tail passed above my head.

I couldn't injure it on my own. I should focus on stalling it.

It continued its barrage of claw attacks, so I jumped back to avoid it. I thought I had made enough distance, but I apparently was still in its range as it stretched its body and tried to bite me.

I hurriedly leaped to the side, rolling on the ground. As I stood up, I saw that the ground where I'd just been had been gouged out, and the dragon had a mouthful of earth. It was chewing, so I thought it was eating the earth, but no, it spewed a lump of dirt at me!

It was a surprise attack. I couldn't avoid it and I didn't have the time to use magic either. Still, I didn't lose hope.

"Master Jack!" Adele appeared before me and skillfully used her twin swords to ward off the lump of dirt, making it sink into the ground and create a small crater.

I had actually noticed Adele coming my way and had decided to believe in the affinity system of the game, betting that she would save me in time.

"Well done! Now, let's attack it together!"

"Yes!"

The numbness in my arms was gone. Together, we attacked the lesser earth dragon with our twin blades: Adele from the left, and I from the right.

It swung down its tail at me, so I leaped to the right. Its tail sunk into the ground and I tried to stab it, but I only felt a hard sensation. I figured that its tail

was especially tough, considering the dragon used it as a weapon.

“How dare you attack *my* Master Jack?! Unforgivable!” Adele drew closer to it while avoiding its fangs and forelimbs, then slashed at its belly.

I, on the other hand, could only defend myself. It made me realize just how wide the difference in our skills was, and even though I was before a powerful enemy, I was frustrated, my head somewhere else.

If I'm not strong, my life will be full of people taking from me. I don't want to live a life in despair again. I have to become stron—

“Master Jack! Watch out!” Adele shouted, making me realize that I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings. The enemy's tail was right in front of me.

I somehow managed to guard with my Twin Hydra Blades, but I was still blown away. I collided with the fences before going right through them, and rolled to a stop.

“Gah!” I coughed up blood. It hurt so much that I almost thought I had been smashed to a pulp. But I was alive. I figured it hadn't been a direct attack aimed at me, and I had been lucky.

“Master Jack! Are you all right?!” Kevin tried to run to my side, his face pale, but I raised a hand to stop him.

I wiped the blood flowing from my brow and used my Twin Hydra Blades as crutches to stand up. “No problem. We're moving to the next plan soon. Get to work!” I yelled, enduring the pain.

“U-Understood!” Kevin lost to my spirit and left with the soldiers who had been waiting next to the fences.

By the way, the lizardmen still hadn't made their move. Maybe they didn't want to be involved in the lesser earth dragon's fight. Well, even if they attacked, the adventurers would take care of them. Even if some had run away, they should be fine with Mason the guildmaster present.

“Adele! Come back!” Not only had I fought alone for a while, but I was also quite injured, so I called Adele for help. She made a big leap backward and headed toward me.

Of course, angry to have been wounded, the lesser earth dragon chased after her. The lizardman who had held its chain earlier ordered it to stop, but the dragon didn't listen. Its rage was such that it wasn't possible to control it anymore.

Once Adele reached me, we started to run together. Our destination was the center of the village, where the pit was. We'd hidden it with a covering.

We stood above the pit and waited.

The lesser earth dragon roared, spittle flying everywhere. It had cuts on its belly and its throat. Thanks to Adele, everything was going as planned.

"Master Jack..." Adele called my name anxiously.

I embraced her. Of course, it wasn't to comfort her—it was to not let her escape.

The dragon finally reached us, and opened its jaw wide to swallow us whole, but it let out a groan of surprise as the ground beneath it crumbled and it began to fall.

"Shadow Walk." Before we could be dragged with it, I used shadows to move us outside the pit.

Using my spell on two people at once almost took all my remaining mana. I felt dizzy and fell to one knee. Coupled with my injuries, it almost made me lose consciousness, but I frantically withstood it. I had to make sure that my plan would succeed.

"Throw the barrels! Don't let Master Jack's work go to waste!" Kevin yelled with a furious expression.

The soldiers threw the barrels into the pit one after another. Their movements were fluid and you could see they had practiced a lot.

"Don't stop!"

"Hurry!"

"Don't drop even a single one!"

The fall into the pit didn't hurt the lesser earth dragon, and it was trying to

clamber out. Some barrels hit its head, breaking and scattering water. Some even got in its eyes. The other barrels hit the ground and broke too, completely soaking the dragon.

“Will that really be enough to defeat it?” Adele muttered anxiously, so I patted her head.

I didn’t know the answer either, but I couldn’t let it show. “Of course. It’s my plan, after all. And I have another one, so we’re definitely gonna win.”

“Right! You truly are amazing, Master Jack!”

Man, she was so pure and innocent. If she stayed like that, someday, she was going to suffer at the hands of some bad guy’s deceit.

The lesser earth dragon, still in the pit, crunched the barrels as it tried to get out. It probably wouldn’t take long for the beast to escape.

As for the adventurers, they must be fighting against the goblins and the monitor lizards, as I could hear sounds of people battling. If it were like the game, the lizardmen would take the field after they’d lost enough of their minions.

“We’re reaching the limit!” Ludwig shouted miserably.

I turned back toward the lesser earth dragon. Though scared, the soldiers were standing guard with their spears after throwing all the barrels we’d prepared. They overcame their fear to accomplish their duty. It was hard to believe that guys with such guts had been slacking off on their training.

“Go help the adventurers!”

It still hurt like hell, but I had to stay conscious for the decisive moment. After confirming that the soldiers had gone to help the adventurers, I looked back at the pit.

The lesser earth dragon wasn’t there anymore. In the short time I had taken my eyes off it, it had managed to get back to the surface.

“Guoooooooooh!” it roared, hurting my eardrums. Away from here, the adventurers, my soldiers, and even the monsters stiffened up, seized with fear. If we were in the game, that would be the “stun” negative status effect.

“Hide behind me!” Adele stood before me, thinking that I was going to be attacked.

The lesser earth dragon glared at me hatefully, stepped forward, and...collapsed. Blood leaked from its eyes.

“Huh?” blurted Adele, who had been prepared to die. Even though I had explained the plan to her, she couldn’t understand what was happening.

“The hydra’s poison that I added to the water is finally taking effect,” I explained.

“Ah! I forgot about that!”

My twin swords could produce poison, like the hydra they were made from. Its potency was such that even a lesser earth dragon would collapse from it. Well, if it were a human, it would die instantly. Anyway, with deadly poison entering its eyes, mouth, and injuries, there was no way it could stand up. It tried, in fact, but it already couldn’t move as it wanted. If we left it like that, it would eventually die.

“Adele, be careful and stay back.”

I didn’t want her to think that now was the opportunity to strike, only to receive a counterattack and die. We had to win safely and reliably. That was why I made all these preparations. Now, we only needed to wait.

The lesser earth dragon finally stopped trying to stand. The poison had finally gone through its whole body, and it stopped moving entirely. It was still breathing, though, so it was still alive.

Just as I thought it was about to die, it opened its jaw wide, in a last struggle.

“I wonder what it is trying to do?”

“Who knows...”

It wasn’t a monster involved in the main scenario of the game, so I didn’t remember much about the way it fought. Only that it used its bite and claws for single target attacks, and used its tail for area attacks. Aside from that, there was the ability common to all dragons: they entered a berserk state when near death. All their stats were multiplied by 1.5 and a special skill was activated. It

was quite troublesome as it would strengthen the elemental breath for dragons who could use it, and allow the use of magic for those who couldn't. Being a lesser dragon, it couldn't use breath attacks...but it might use magic!

"The ground is moving!" Adele shouted.

I had been so focused on the lesser earth dragon's mouth that I hadn't noticed what was happening to the ground.

Its special ability allows it to use earth magic!

I didn't know what kind of spell it used, but staying too close would end badly for us!

"Run! Get away, quick!"

"You too, Master Jack!" Adele took my hand and was about to start running when, suddenly, something sprouted from the ground.

"Watch out!" I embraced her and leaped to the side. A spear made of dirt shot out of the ground, directly where we'd been. If I had been a single instant slower, we would have been skewered.

However, we still couldn't rest—I sensed mana in the ground. It extended over a large area, so just running away wouldn't be enough.

"I leave the rest to you," I said and used the last drop of mana I had left. *"Shadow Walk."*

I didn't have the leeway to choose where we would emerge, so we moved to the shadow of the first building that had entered my sight. When I looked back, countless lances of earth had sprouted from the ground, with the lesser earth dragon at their center.

Having used all my mana, I felt sick and wanted to vomit. I was losing consciousness. I didn't want to faint in a situation where anyone could betray me, but if we had stayed there, we would have died. I'd had no other choice.

Adele stroked my back as I vomited gastric juice. She looked pretty worried, even though I was only showing the symptoms of mana exhaustion.

"I'm tired. Gonna sleep."

“I will be by your side until you wake up. Sleep well.”

When was the last time I had heard such gentle words? I couldn't remember. It made me think that, once the side quest was finished, I should let Adele live in luxury along with me. If people knew about that, would they think I was a sucker? No, if it was just a little thing, like eating tons of sweets together, nobody should complain.

* * *

I woke up inside my tent, which meant we were still in Third Village. I didn't feel any of the pain from before I passed out, so I figured that they must have healed my injuries with the fourth-grade potion I'd brought. Feeling a weight on me, I lifted my blanket and found Adele sleeping on me in her underwear. Her face was pressed against my stomach, and her nostrils were twitching.

Is she...sniffing me?

Adele often clung to me like a dog, so I was used to it. It didn't really turn me on, though. Maybe it was because she sort of felt like a little sister?

She had probably been worried about me after I fainted, and stayed with me since then. I would feel bad waking her, so I slowly got out of bed and sat on a chair. I filled a glass with water from the pitcher on the table and hydrated myself. Just as I finished, Adele raised her head.

“Master Jack?” She rubbed her eyes and got up, searching for me. She was as adorable as a child, thanks to her petite body.

“Good morning,” I greeted her.

Her dog ears twitched at my voice. She turned my way, and the moment she saw me, she threw herself at me. “I'm so glad you woke up!”

I get that you're happy—I just need to look at your swaying tail. But come on, think about the way you're dressed before doing stuff like this!

As she embraced me, I was going to tell her to put some clothes on, but I wasn't fast enough.

Lumié entered the tent.

We looked at each other.

Silently.

Not saying a word.

I don't think that cold little glint in her eyes is my imagination.

"You see—"

"I heard you had successfully subjugated the monsters, so I rushed here myself, but... It seems I am intruding," she said in an icy tone, completely different from her normal manner.

"No, it's not what it looks like!" I tried to explain, but Lumié ignored me and put a letter on the table.

"I am sorry to impose on you while you are busy, but please read this once you are done."



Then she left.

And here I thought I had increased Kevin's affinity by fighting alongside him. Yet here I am, decreasing Lumié's affinity.

"This is hard..."

I didn't especially want to be liked, but being betrayed too early would be a pain, so I had to manage everyone's affinity carefully. Lumié in particular knew every corner of the mansion and was on good terms with all my vassals. She was irreplaceable, at least until I could find and train a suitable substitute. Same for Kevin.

"Hey, how long are you planning to cling to me? Get off."

Because she kept smelling me, I forcibly pulled her off and pointed at her clothes on the ground at the foot of the bed. She sensed I was a little angry, so she tottered away with her ears flopping. I felt slightly guilty, but I couldn't pamper her too much.

"What happened after I fainted?" I asked.

"The lesser earth dragon died from the poison. Some of your soldiers were wounded, but we did not lose anyone, even among the adventurers," she answered as she was putting her clothes on.

My plan went perfectly!

Normally, we should have been crushed and the Girard territory destroyed—but I'd changed that fate, and with zero deaths to boot. That was a flawless victory. Winning against an enemy that was a few levels above us gave me the confidence that I could survive in this world.

Man, I feel so great right now!

So great, in fact, that I didn't even mind Adele getting into my lap once she finished getting dressed. I even hugged her gently and allowed her to sniff the nape of my neck.

"What about its corpse?"

"The soldiers are currently peeling off its scales."

Its meat was useless because I'd poisoned it, but its scales, fangs, and claws should sell at a high price. The fact my soldiers had acted prudently without waiting for me to give them instructions was a sign of their growth.

"Who's in charge?"

"It should be Ludwig."

Lumié's little brother is doing his best, huh? He might be surprisingly well-suited to management.

"I want to see the process. Adele, can you take me there?"

"Certainly!" She must have been glad to have orders, as she stopped pressing her face against my neck, stood up, and exited the tent.

She's just like a little kid.

I hung my Twin Hydra Blades on my waist, grabbed the letter Lumié had placed on the table, and left the tent too. I followed Adele until we reached the pit we had dug in the village plaza.

In front of me was the corpse of the lesser earth dragon. A short distance away, its peeled scales were piled up like a mountain, with two soldiers keeping an eye out for thieves. Just how much were we going to earn from all this? I was really looking forward to it. The other soldiers were still peeling the remaining scales and the claws. However, what surprised me was that the villagers were present and helping as well.

"Lord Jack is here!" a villager shouted, and everyone looked at me.

I put myself on guard for an instant, thinking that they might be hostile, but no, they were welcoming me. Everyone was smiling.

"Thank you for protecting our village!" They all bowed, adults and children alike.

So that was what I had risked my life to protect? I had been so desperate in trying to survive that it never even occurred to me that I would be thanked like this. And, no matter how distrustful I was, I understood that the villagers were being honest. The soldiers also had a favorable opinion of me, and since we all

overcame death together, they kinda thought of me as a comrade in arms.

“I accept your gratitude. Now, continue your work.”

Not only did I get money, but I also won over the hearts of the people and my soldiers. It'd been an arduous side quest, but what I got from it was well worth the trouble.

“I have been waiting for you, Master Jack,” Kevin said as I was immersing myself in my good mood. From his expression, I could guess it wouldn't be a fun talk. Kinda felt like I was dragged back to reality.

“What is it?”

“You need to take care of the tax collector's punishment.”

Ah, yeah, there was that guy too. The lesser earth dragon left such a strong impression that I forgot about him.

“I want to see him. Where is he?”

“This way.”

With Adele as a guard, I followed Kevin to a building on the outskirts of the village. Inside was the tax collector, with his limbs bound and his mouth gagged with a rope. He tried to speak, but could only produce some indistinct mumbles. I figured he was trying to beg for his life. I was curious about what he would be saying this late in the game, so I was going to remove the rope from his mouth, but...

“Master Jack,” Kevin said.

It might have been my imagination, but for an instant, I felt like if I touched the rope I would be cut, so I reflexively stopped.

Is this guy really my vassal? I couldn't help but be anxious.

Kevin slowly walked to the tax collector and lifted him up. “Someone on the verge of being executed is only going to express their resentment. I do not think that there is a need for you to hear him.”

What he said made sense. Considering he was going to be killed in less than an hour, of course he was going to bear a grudge against me. There was also the

slight chance of him using a curse spell, so it was dangerous.

“It’s my first execution as the head of House Girard. I want to at least hear his last words.”

These weren’t my true feelings. The truth was that my instincts—no, the remains of Jack inside me—were whispering that I shouldn’t believe him. That I should act on the basis that he was betraying me.

It was something I had been conscious of since I’d reincarnated in this world based on *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. If I feared Adele’s betrayal in the event her affinity went down, then I could never trust Kevin and Lumié—whom I already knew would betray me from the game scenario.

My relaxed mood from a few minutes ago now completely forgotten, I tensed up.

“Your father said the same thing and regretted it.”

“Explain.”

“Even though he did his best to rule this domain, he only received harsh criticism. Not only that, the criminal in question had used brainwashing magic to control an innocent person and had them kill the maid who had taken care of the previous lord since his childhood.”

As Jack was the protagonist, there weren’t any details about his parents’ past. So what he said could have possibly happened. A story like “my parents weren’t trash from the start; they fell to evil because of past trauma” was easy to accept.

“Any witnesses or proof?” I asked.

Precisely *because* it was so easy to accept, it felt like a made-up story—as if Kevin had just thought it up to convince me. It made me suspect that he was hiding something.

“I am the only person left who knows about it. However, the previous head wrote a diary, so maybe he mentioned it there.”

So I couldn’t verify it now. It was a shame, but it would have to wait. Anyway, I wasn’t entirely convinced, but Kevin didn’t betray Jack at the beginning of the

game. Whether it was the truth or not didn't change the fact that the tax collector would be executed, so I should prioritize keeping Kevin's affinity up. I could only check the veracity of his story later.

"Fine, I'll believe you. Carry him."

Kevin put the tax collector on his shoulder. We came back to the plaza where the lesser earth dragon was being processed, and Kevin threw him on the ground, creating a little cloud of dust.

"Stop working and get over here!" I yelled.

Hearing my order, the soldiers and the villagers gathered in front of me. When they saw the bound tax collector, their cheerful mood quickly soured.

"This man here coerced every village into creating hidden fields to evade taxes."

Only my close retainers had known about the tax collector's crime, so the soldiers and villagers stirred in surprise. The villagers, in particular, were afraid that they might receive a harsh punishment, and some of them even tried to run away. I glanced at Ludwig, and he instructed the soldiers to surround the villagers. Their faces were full of despair. The village chief's wife and daughter in particular were crying, certain that they would be executed.

"Here is the tax collector's testimony." I ignored them and raised the parchment so that everyone could see it. "It is written here that the tax collector is the ringleader behind this tax evasion, and that everyone else is a victim who didn't have any choice but to obey. As such, the only one to be executed is the tax collector. Everyone else will spend the next ten years paying back what they owe."

Hearing my judgment, the villagers were pleased. No wonder, considering that they had thought that I was going to execute them all. Also, because the tax collector's job was—as its name indicated—to collect taxes, everyone hated him. There wasn't a shred of compassion to be seen in the crowd.

"Well then, let the execution begin."

There was no executioner, so I drew one of my Twin Hydra Blades and decapitated the man myself. He shouldn't even have had the time to feel pain.

Still, even though I had finally killed someone, I didn't feel any guilt. Jack's spirit might be affecting me.

Blood gushed from the tax collector's neck for a while before it stopped. Expressionless, Kevin took the corpse by the leg. "I shall burn it, throw it in the pit, and bury it."

I felt like he treated the corpse a little too roughly, but I figured that was just how criminals were dealt with. Being too lenient might cause people to underestimate me, so maybe it was better to be this harsh.

"Remember this. I'll never forgive those who betray me. I'll chase them until the end of time if I have to," I said, brandishing my bloodied sword.

It had quite the persuasive effect, as the villagers were clearly afraid of me. I felt slightly sad about it, but I didn't need any friends. Being at the top of an organization meant being alone, and it was the same for a feudal lord.

"Half of the soldiers will remain here. Finish processing the dragon, and then confirm if there are any remaining lizardmen. Do not return until you're certain there isn't a single one left! I leave the member selection to Ludwig!" I had someone else to talk to; I couldn't waste any more time here. I shook off the blood from the blade of my sword, sheathed it, and left the plaza.

I went with Adele to the edge of the village, where the adventurers had pitched their tents. A muscled, bulky man stood up the moment he saw me—Mason, the guildmaster of the Girard territory's Adventurer Guild.

Despite his appearance, the way he bowed was truly elegant. "A pleasure to meet you. I am the guildmaster of the Adventurer Guild, Mason."

"Good work today. I'm Jack Girard. You may call me Baron Girard."

"Understood, Baron Girard."

I thought he would be a wilder man, but he actually knew his manners. It made sense that a simple muscle-brain couldn't end up in charge of an entire guild.

"I want to talk about the reward, but... Before that, there is something else we must talk about, no?"

“Is it about the adventurers who fled?”

“Exactly. What do you intend to do, Mason?”

I wanted to know how seriously he took it, and what kind of punishment he was considering.

“Naturally, they will receive no reward. They’ll each lose a rank as well, and I will train them back from the basics.”

“We had reported the existence of the lesser earth dragon beforehand, yet they fled so shamefully regardless. Aren’t you being too soft on them?” The monster-slaying specialists ran away despite the fact that the village’s future hinged on that battle. I couldn’t allow them to receive such a meager penalty.

Feeling my anger, Adele put her hands on the hilts of her twin swords, making Mason gulp audibly.

“...Well then, Baron Girard, what kind of punishment do you wish to give?”

If I asked for the execution of all the people who had run away, Mason would definitely object to protect the guild. He would most likely contact the headquarters in the capital, which would cause quite an uproar. Neither he nor I wished for that to happen. I didn’t want rumors of a big incident in the Girard territory to spread.

“I want every adventurer who ran to pay a penalty for breach of contract equal to the initial fee for the quest. Moreover, taking into account how the guild couldn’t manage its own adventurers correctly, the completion bonus of receiving something from my treasure vault should be revoked.”

“But—!”

“What, you can’t?”

“The reward would be too small. The adventurers will not be happy about it...”

“You could just pay them out of the guild’s coffers, couldn’t you?”

The Adventurer Guild always saved a part of their profits to use in case of an emergency. Basically, I was asking him to use that money.

“But that is—”

“If you can’t, I’ll throw the ten or so adventurers who fled into jail. A suitable punishment for deserters, don’t you think?”

You might consider it a good compromise that didn’t need money, but no, it wasn’t. If the guild couldn’t protect its adventurers, it would make people more distrustful of them. While it was true that some had run away, the fact was that the village *had* been saved, so the adventurers would protest that the punishment was too harsh. I didn’t think that Mason wanted to protect the guild’s funds so badly that he would endure the dishonor of losing to the lord of this territory.

So, which will you choose? Using the guild’s money? Or throwing them in jail even if it means incurring the adventurers’ ire?

“...Understood. Considering the appearance of the lesser earth dragon, I will use the guild’s emergency funds.”

“Brilliant decision.” I smiled and lightly tapped Mason’s shoulder. Then I leaned in close to his ear and whispered, “You’d best be thorough in that retraining.” Then Adele and I left.

With this, I was done with the aftermath of the side quest. It should have improved both my soldiers’ loyalty as well as Adele’s and Kevin’s affinities. What’s more, I managed to lower expenses, and the tax collector was dealt with. If I were to give a score to the result of this side quest, it would be a perfect hundred.

I was feeling great, so I didn’t want to return to my tent just yet—I went for a stroll instead, walking around the village with no destination in mind. I thrust my hands into my pockets and felt something, before taking it out and realizing it was the letter Lumié had brought.

“Guess I should read it.”

I didn’t want to be seen, so I entered a nearby half-destroyed building with Adele. Leaning against a wall, I turned the envelope over. *I don’t know that seal.* I tore it open and removed its contents.

“Let’s see, who’s the sender...”

Seravimia... Wait, that's the hero's name!

In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, the hero was Jack's rival. She was said to be divinely blessed and extremely strong. An important point of the game was to commit your wrongdoings without being discovered by the hero. The moment she did, you were convicted—and it was an instant Game Over. Talk about diabolical difficulty.

Anyway, you could end up condemned in a number of ways. One of them was sacrificing your people to flee from monsters, and that was one of the reasons I'd needed to protect Third Village no matter what.

Basically, Jack meeting the hero equaled death. More than half of the bad endings were because of the hero, so you should get an idea of how much of a pain she was.

With trembling hands, I read through the letter. The penmanship was really clean, almost methodical. It started with a greeting, then she congratulated me for becoming the new patriarch of my family, and it ended by saying that because the royal family was busy, she would come to inspect my domain in their place.

"The Grim Reaper is coming..." I blurted out, my voice faintly shaking.

She'd written that it was an inspection, but the moment I thought that she must have another objective, I remembered the lesser earth dragon. I had concluded that it must have been an unknown hard mode side quest, but after reading this letter, another possibility came to mind.

"Is someone changing the story?"

Maybe I wasn't the only one with knowledge from the game. Just like how I suddenly took possession of this body, it was also possible that someone else could have reincarnated as a baby. Not that the specifics mattered; the point was that someone was derailing the story, and it was very likely that it was Seravimia. The fact that she had taken the Rank A party I had wanted gave credence to my hypothesis.

Thankfully, her visit wasn't for a while. I had to take care of any problem that could make me lose points and be condemned before then.

“Let’s return to the mansion and deal with the next problem.”

Adele had surely noticed the change in my attitude, but she didn’t say anything and followed me to my tent.

The same day, together with Lumié and half of the soldiers, we hastily returned to my mansion.

Chapter 5: Grim Reaper

Once alone, I went back to my office and was greeted by a mountain of reports on my desk. A lot had piled up while I was away. I didn't have the motivation to go through them, though, so I just sat, leaning on the back of my chair. I looked at the ceiling and sorted through my thoughts about the hero.

In *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*, the divinely blessed hero helped the royal family of Valzza, the kingdom I was part of. Basically, she was Jack's enemy, since he tried to become king by staging a coup d'état. As long as Jack was trying to take over the Valzza Kingdom, the hero would always become his opponent. As a boss character, she was, of course, extremely strong—but the most troublesome factor was that her blessing would kick in whenever she was in a tough spot, healing all of her wounds and drastically increasing her power. Once it came to that, she was *too* strong. Even with a party including Adele, the chance of victory was quite low. I'd lost so many times. Her strength was so overwhelming that I'd originally considered sending a bug report.

"If a fight starts, I'm sure to lose. And even if luck is on my side and I win, the Valzzan royal family is going to punish me."

No matter the result, becoming the hero's enemy only led to doom. She was truly worthy of being called the Grim Reaper.

"So I should ensure that never happens."

As long as we weren't enemies, she was actually a pretty reliable force that protected the Valzza Kingdom from other countries and monsters. From the moment I became Jack, I had thrown away the ambition of becoming king and decided to live luxuriously in the safe kingdom protected by the hero.

I had been careful to not misgovern, so I should have been able to get away from the hero. But how could I have predicted that the hero had knowledge from the game too?! Damn it, I was still unlucky even after reincarnating!

It was like having a knife at my throat, and I couldn't stay calm. I straightened, separating myself from the back of my chair, and angrily struck the desk. My hand tingled in pain, but I didn't care. Far from calming me down, my fit had

only made me more irritated.

Just when I raised my arm to vent my anger once again, someone knocked on the door.

“Master Jack, I brought you black tea.” It was Lumié.

I couldn’t let someone that might betray me in the future see me act so disgracefully. I took a deep breath, telling myself to calm down, and said, “Come in.”

Lumié entered the room, pushing a cart with a teapot, a cup, and sweets on it. “I thought you would be tired, so I prepared baked sweets as well.”

She was quite the thoughtful maid. Well, I wasn’t in the mood to think about stuff, so I figured that I might as well take a rest.

“I’ll eat. Bring them over here.”

Lumié pushed the cart next to me. Because my desk was full of documents, she left the cup on the cart as she poured tea into it. It had a refreshing fruity scent.

“Why do you think the hero would want to come to the Girard territory?” I asked.

As the one who needed to make preparations for the hero’s arrival, Lumié already knew about it. I didn’t have any real reason for my question aside from wanting to not spend time in silence.

“You do not believe that it is a simple inspection?”

“No way the hero would come out here to the sticks for something like that.”

A lot of the higher nobles didn’t even consider countryside barons as their fellow aristocrats. That was just how low my position was in the noble hierarchy. My fief wasn’t an important point of traffic, didn’t border an enemy nation, and didn’t have any important resources such as ore mines. The only thing it could boast about was its flora and fauna, so of course I’d think that the inspection wasn’t the real objective.

“Then...” Lumié muttered as she handed me the cup. I smelled its aroma and took a sip. It was slightly bitter and made me feel a little more awake. “What

about coming to ascertain your worth as the new patriarch of House Girard?”

“I’d just need to be summoned, in that case.”

The hero’s rank was roughly equal to that of a count. A single letter was enough to summon a rural baron. I wouldn’t even be able to refuse without a proper reason. But I *did* think that Lumié’s suggestion was one of the hero’s objectives—just not the only one. It wasn’t enough on its own to make her come here herself, after all.

“Then maybe the hero wants something that can only be found in the Girard territory?”

“There’s nothing here that can’t be obtained in the capital. That’s the most improbable thing I’ve ever—”

No, wait... I remembered something. Each time you reached a bad ending after Jack was killed by the hero, there was an epilogue. What was it again... Ah, yeah, because the domain lost its lord, it fell under the direct control of the royal family, and then...the hero became the new lord!

Yeah, now I remember. I even found it strange that she would choose such a rural territory when she could get a bigger one. If the hero has knowledge from the game, it makes sense. She would want to see her future lands, and take them if there is a chance.

I had made my parents fall into a coma to become the new head faster, so it wasn’t weird that the hero would want to do the same.

“Your opinion was quite helpful. Thanks, Lumié.”

“I am glad to have been useful. Are you feeling calmer?”

“Yeah, because I know what to do now.”

The hero would need a proper reason if she wanted to take over the Girard territory. There might be a big problem that I didn’t know of. Considering my parents, it wouldn’t be weird if they did some things that a sane person wouldn’t. I had to check old documents.

“I want to read over the data from the past ten years. Bring everything to me.”

“Understood.”

I was still new at the job, and there was a lot I didn’t know. If the domain was taken over because of that, forget living in luxury—I was doomed.

To deal with the big bomb that was the hero, I was ready to stay up all night to gather intel.

Two days later, I was still reading reports. I had dark circles under my eyes, and my head was swimming. I was so tired that my work efficiency had plummeted.

“You should rest, Master Jack,” Lumié suggested, seeing me and the room full of scattered parchment. Was she worried about me?

“I’m only halfway through all this, yet I’ve already found a number of problems. I don’t have the time to rest.”

There were a few ways for someone to take these lands from me.

The most peaceful way was by marrying me. Becoming a part of the family meant having a say in the management of the territory, and depending on the children’s education, it would even be possible to do whatever they wanted.

The most extreme way was to simply kill me. I didn’t have any relatives, so if I died the domain would be returned to the royal family. From there, it’d go straight to Seravimia.

Other methods would include my disobeying an order from the royal family, colluding with a foreign nation, failing to repay a debt, and so on.

“There are a number of problems?” Lumié asked.

“Yeah. My stupid parents borrowed money from our liege-lord, Count Belmond, and the repayment date is coming up. It was hidden so I didn’t know about it.”

The loan amounted to three thousand gold coins, which was quite a large sum for a rural baron. There was no way that a domain on the verge of bankruptcy could repay it entirely. Normally I would ask for an extension of the deadline, but my damned parents already did it *thrice*, so I couldn’t. Even if I couldn’t give

back all of it, I should at least repay a part before the deadline.

“I do not remember any letter asking to repay a debt from Count Belmond. Are you sure?”

Lumié’s doubt wasn’t unusual. I had gone to greet him after becoming the new head, so he could have mentioned it then—but he hadn’t and was waiting for the deadline to pass. I could feel clear malice.

“I’m sure he didn’t say anything because he wants us to ruin ourselves.”

“Huh? How could he?!” Lumié’s hands flew to her mouth in astonishment. Was she despairing over the fact that even our liege-lord had abandoned us? That might become a motive for her to betray me, but I would immediately know if she did, so I decided not to worry about it.

“If my hypothesis is right, the hero is after these lands. Why not join hands with Count Belmond if that means being able to get the thorn that is my presence out of their sides?” Seravimia could judge me as unfit to be a ruler and evict me using the fact that I couldn’t repay my debt. If it was possible in the game, it was possible in reality too. Even more so with the hero’s authority.

“But why would the hero do that...?”

“I don’t know. But now that we know our opponent’s objective, there’s a way to deal with it.”

Looking at the contract that had been made during the original loan request, it was possible to repay in installments. If I sent one hundred gold coins to Count Belmond before the deadline, I should be able to extend it for a few months. That rule was used to make the debt last longer and increase the interest, so it was advantageous for the other party, but here I would use it to thwart the hero’s plan instead.

“We’ll pay in installments and extend the deadline. We need to sell all the materials we gathered from the lesser earth dragon by the end of today.”

That should earn us around one thousand gold coins at the market price. Even if it was a lesser dragon, it was still a dragon—its parts were valuable.

I stood up with the intention of immediately enacting my plans, but my vision

dimmed and I lost strength in my legs. Just when I thought I would hit my face against the floor, Lumié caught me in an embrace.

“You work too much, Master Jack. Please rest. I heard that Ludwig and the others have returned, so I will tell them what to do.”

“Why would you do that, Lumié...?”

“House Girard is in danger. Please let me help.”

What the hell is she trying to say? We discovered that Count Belmond was our enemy too. Shouldn't she ignore me and run away? *Ah, I see, she wants to steal the money.*

“I can't leave it to someone else. I'll do it.”

I should be able to get the money immediately if I brought everything to the Welza Company. They might take advantage of me a little, but I should at least get enough to pay a few installments.

I gathered my strength in an effort to stand up, but Lumié embraced me even more tightly. I lost against her feminine softness and stopped resisting.

“I cannot let you. Working any more will affect your health.”

“Even then, I just can't rest in a situation like this.”

Lumié sat on the floor and put my head on her thighs. In other words, it was a lap pillow. For some reason, it was very soothing.

“You are trying too hard, Master Jack. When I heard about how you directly fought the lesser earth dragon, I almost had a heart attack.”

“I couldn't leave it to the soldiers. I had no other choice.”

“There is also the matter of the tax collector's fraud and his execution. You need to rest.”

Was she implying that my body wasn't the only part of me that was exhausted? Why was she so worried about me? I hadn't brought her with us during the side quest—her affinity should be unchanged.

“Please, do not solely rely on Adele. We are here too. It makes us sad to not be counted on.”

Could it be that the reason she had been so cold in the tent back then wasn't because I had been with Adele in her underwear, but because I trusted Adele—a newcomer—more than her? I never thought it possible that Lumié would feel lonely because I distanced myself from her. However, considering that she was an actual person and not a game character, her feelings might be natural. After all, she had served me for years, and yet I didn't trust her.

"...I see." She might betray me one day, but maybe I could trust her for now—though this feeling might be coming from a moment of weakness because of my lack of sleep. "I'll leave it to you, then."

"Yes. You can count on me," she said gently.

I wanted to know what kind of expression she was wearing, but sleepiness overtook me and I started to lose consciousness. The only thing I could make out through my blurred vision was that she was smiling.

I closed my eyes as she caressed my head. I was certain that, at least for today, I would be able to have a pleasant dream.

* * *

When I woke up, I was on a bed. From looking around, I understood that it was my bedroom and that nobody else was present. Lumié must have carried me here after giving me a lap pillow in the office. She must also have been the one to change me into my nightwear.

My body still felt heavy, and my head dizzy. I almost succumbed to the temptation to go back to sleep, but when I remembered the hero, I forced myself to get up. When I looked outside, it was pitch black.

"It's night, huh? I overslept."

I'd collapsed a little before noon, so I'd wasted a lot of time. I wondered if the lesser earth dragon parts had been sold. If we didn't get money, the hero could use the debt to eliminate House Girard, so I couldn't permit any mistakes there. The fact that I had to let other people take care of such an important job made me restless, and I couldn't calm down.

Everyone must be sleeping now, but I really want to know the current situation, so I guess I should wake someone.

Just as I got out of bed, I heard a faint sound—the door was opening. I prepared myself for an assassin, but it was Lumié, carrying a silver tray with a pitcher and a porcelain cup.

“You finally woke up,” she said. Even though it was the dead of the night, she had come to check on my condition.

I remembered what she had said before I fainted: *“We are here too. It makes us sad to not be counted on.”*

To be honest, since coming to this world, I had been trying to manage affinity, loyalty, and other invisible parameters, so I always thought of Kevin, Adele, and Lumié as game characters. That way, even if I were to be betrayed, I could simply blame the fact that they were acting just like in the game.

But I was wrong. I finally realized something obvious—they were people. Just as my words and deeds could hurt them, they could also please them. If I continued to ignore their feelings, thinking that they were just acting like they were in the game, it would come back to bite me in the future.

I should stop being fixated on the game scenario and only use it as a reference. In the first place, people in this world had their own free will, so there was no way that everything would go the same as it did in the story of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. Even without the hero suddenly appearing, it was highly probable that we would have greatly diverged from the scenario in the near future.

“I got to sleep, so I’m feeling good now,” I lied. After all, if she told me to go back to sleep, I wouldn’t be able to work. “How did the sale go?”

Lumié didn’t answer my question. Instead, she poured water into the cup and came up to me. “You should hydrate yourself first.”

I was thirsty, so I accepted the cup and drank it whole. I felt like the water was refreshingly spreading through every nook and cranny of my body.

“Do you want another cup?”

“No, I’m fine.” I put my cup on the tray and looked her straight in the eyes, urging her to answer my question.

“Kevin and I sold everything.”

“How much did you earn?”

“One thousand gold coins. The buyer was the Welza Company. Is that a problem?”

“No, you did well.”

House Girard had a contract with the Welza Company, so everything we wanted to sell had to go through them. Because we were on a deadline, I had thought the Welza Company might try to take advantage of us, but Lumié and Kevin managed to get us the market price. I should praise them for their skillful negotiation.

Anyway, now that I knew I had obtained the necessary money, I could finally relax a bit. I unsteadily walked back to my bed and sat down.

“We should be fine for a while if we send a letter along with the first installment to Count Belmond.” I looked at Lumié, who was still standing next to me. She was expressionless, and I couldn’t guess what she was thinking. Was she really the same person who’d told me that she was sad when I didn’t rely on her? “Bring me what I need to write a letter for the count.”

“Certainly.” She bowed and exited the room.

Then, as if replacing her, Adele entered instead.

Come on, this is your liege’s bedroom. You can’t enter it so casually...

“Master Jack! I have been so worried since I heard you fainted!”

Well, I guess I can’t complain if she opens with that.

I patted Adele’s back as she buried her face in my stomach and cried.

“I just needed sleep. Nothing to be so concerned over.”

“Of course I would be concerned! I am your guard, Master Jack!” She put her arms around my waist, embracing me. I could feel how strongly she didn’t want to separate from me. That was another piece of evidence that Adele wasn’t just a game character; she was acting on her own feelings.

“I know, and I’m always relying on you.”

If not for her, I would have been killed by the lesser earth dragon. The soldiers would have been untrained, and I wouldn't be able to use dual swords. I truly relied on her for everything military, so my words came straight from the heart.

"Yes! You can count on me! I will always protect you!" Overjoyed from being praised, Adele rubbed her face against my stomach. She even sniffed me while she was at it, but it didn't bother me.

Man, it's been so long since I've been able to feel so relaxed around someone. I hadn't been able to feel like that since my wife's betrayal, but thanks to Lumié and Adele, I remembered how it felt to rely on someone.

"And I'll protect the Girard territory." I still wanted to live a life of luxury—that objective hadn't changed. However, I now had a few more reasons to defend my domain. So if the hero really wanted to take it over, then I'd fight with all I had. For myself, but also for Lumié and Adele.

My determination renewed, I continued to work like mad from the next day onward.

I sent a letter and money to Count Belmond and received an answer soon after, settling the debt matter.

There were other problems I had inherited from my utterly stupid parents, but nothing grand enough to have my domain taken away from me. I could take my time to deal with them. What I had to pour all my energy into right now was my face-off with the hero. Between the game knowledge and her trying to take over my fief, I was quite skeptical about her.

I'll use today's discussion to ascertain her true objective.

As I was worrying about the budget's allotment, Lumié entered the office.

"The hero is here."

A little while ago, a gorgeous two-horse carriage had arrived at the mansion—and just as expected, it was the hero's.

Lumié was nervously waiting for my reply.

“Did you guide her to the parlor?”

“Yes. Kevin is currently welcoming her and her retinue.”

Well, Kevin wouldn't make a blunder here.

The hero was equal in rank to a count. Even if I was a baron, it was like being a commoner compared to her. I couldn't let anyone make a mistake that would make me look bad. If I fought her head-on, I wouldn't be able to win, so I could only hope everything would go well.

“Time to go.” I put away my pen and took the handbag with the documents I needed inside. I stopped in front of my desk and spread my arms. “How do I look?”

“You have a suitable appearance to meet a noble ranked higher than you.”

I was wearing black pants coupled with a shirt, and a suit jacket with a crest of a flower and a poisonous snake sewn on. I didn't know what they were made of, but they were silky and comfortable. I usually wore more casual clothes, but because I'd known that the hero would come today, I'd been working in my suit.

“I'm going first. You go rejoin Adele and prepare black tea.”

“Understood.” She bowed and exited the room.

Then I left the office too, walked through the now plain corridor, and reached the parlor's door where two soldiers were standing guard.

“Good job,” I said, and they saluted with their hands on their chests. One of them was Ludwig. I had promoted him to captain after the lizardmen quest, so why was he here? “Shouldn't you leave security work to the other soldiers?”

“An important guest is present, so I thought I should be on-site.”

I figured he must have heard from Lumié that I was concerned about the hero. I thought he was a little too overprotective—like his sister—but I decided to honestly accept the feeling. “I see. Then I'm counting on you.”

Unlike the other soldiers, whom I didn't know anything about, I was a little familiar with Ludwig's personality, so it was easier to guess how he would act. He wouldn't be a problem.

I knocked on the door, and after a few seconds, it slowly opened.

“We were waiting for you,” Kevin welcomed me.

I looked inside the room and saw three women sitting on the sofa. On the left and right were women with fair skin, silver hair, long ears, moderate chests, and green attire that seemed easy to move in. They were the two members of the Verdant Wind. The older sister had long hair that reached her waist, while the younger sister’s was shorter, but still long enough to hide her ears. I’d heard in advance that the hero would bring them, so I wasn’t surprised by their presence. In fact, considering that they liked the Girard territory, they might even have volunteered to come.

Finally, the woman smiling happily while sandwiched between the elf sisters was the hero. She had short black hair, black eyes, skin with a similar hue to Asian people, and her face was nicely proportioned—basically, she looked like a Japanese person. The reason was that the creator of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat* had made her based on an idol they liked (source: their SNS account). The fact that she looked like a Japanese person made me feel closer to her, but that in itself made me even more wary.

“Have the soldiers come in here,” I whispered to Kevin, and I stepped inside the parlor. The hero noticed me and stood up. The elf sisters did the same a moment later. “Excuse me for the wait,” I said with a smile. “I am House Girard’s patriarch, Jack Girard. I am pleased to welcome you to my mansion.” I bowed and extended my hand for a handshake.

“I am the fifth hero, Seravimia. These two are my guards, Lily and Olivia.” The elf sisters bowed, and Seravimia took my hand. I thought that she would shake it and be done, but instead she grasped it and stepped closer to me. “Do you know what my work as the hero consists of, Baron Girard?”

“Naturally. You are an emissary of justice with the right to investigate nobles, and judge them if they have turned to villainy.”

She was basically both an enforcer and a judge for the aristocrats. It was pretty absurd, but considering that this world was based on a fangame, I had no other choice but to accept it. Incidentally, even if she was the hero, she couldn’t forcibly investigate high-ranked nobles. On the other hand, rural barons were

totally fine—and if she set her pride aside, she could even fabricate misdeeds.

“I did not think you would call me an emissary of justice, Baron Girard.”

“What did you think I would call you?”

“The Grim Reaper.”

You’re right, but should you really call yourself that?!

From the nobles’ point of view, the hero was the bringer of ruin and death—the Grim Reaper. Seravimia clearly understood what her position was and the authority she had.

“Ha ha, you jest,” I replied with a smile. Because I had died in the pit of despair in my previous life, I wanted to live an extravagant and luxurious life as an aristocrat this time. That meant the hero keeping an eye on me would be undesirable. If that line had flustered me, she would have understood that I thought of her as the Grim Reaper, so I did my best to make no retort to her self-deprecating joke.

“We will see if I was joking as we discuss,” Seravimia muttered in a low tone, narrowing her eyes. She was most likely trying to provoke me, but of course I wouldn’t fall for it.

“Is that so?” I played dumb. Seravimia’s mouth was agape. I took the chance to release my hand from her grip. “Well then, let us end the salutations here and move on to the main subject.” Seravimia looked like she wanted to say something, but I ignored her and walked away, so she gave up with a small sigh.

With this, I’d managed to break her momentum. I let her and the elf sisters sit first, then did the same on the sofa in front of them. Just before I could start the conversation, I heard a knock and Lumié’s voice.

“I have brought beverages.”

“Enter.” I gave her permission, and the guards opened the door.

The first one to enter was Lumié. “Excuse us.” She bowed to Seravimia and advanced. Adele, dressed as a maid, followed behind her, pushing a cart with black tea and sweets. One of the countermeasures against the hero was to have Adele dress as a maid to allow her to stay near me. She had two large knives

strapped to her thighs hidden under her skirt, which would enable her to fight back if Seravimia got violent. The hero and the elf sisters had their weapons confiscated, so Adele should be able to put up a good fight.

“Hmm? You are...” Seravimia muttered when she noticed Adele. Even though it should be their first meeting, she acted as if she already knew her.

“Are you acquainted?” I asked.

“No, I mistook her for someone else.” She denied it, but she looked like she was lying. Knowing Adele increased the likelihood of her having knowledge from the game.

Adele stopped the cart next to the table, and Lumié prepared the tea and cookies. Adele would definitely make a mistake if it was up to her, so I had her stand behind me instead.

“This black tea is made from leaves harvested in the Girard territory. The special thing about them is that they are sweet, so there is no need to add sugar,” I explained.

Seravimia took her cup, enjoyed the aroma, then sipped her tea. The elf sisters did the same. “It truly is sweet. This is delicious...”

Sweetness wasn't really common in this world. Even the cookies on the table didn't have any sugar in them—it was too precious—and were instead mixed with fruits for sweetening. If we were in Japan that would be plenty, but this world didn't do any selective breeding, so fruits weren't that sweet. The black tea leaves of the Girard territory were quite sweet, however, so they must have found the tea to be quite delicious. The elf sisters looked just as satisfied as Seravimia.

“My fief may not have anything special, but I am certain that we lose to no other domains when it comes to black tea.”

“Indeed. You excel at black tea, if nothing else,” Seravimia said sardonically, making Lumié's eyebrow twitch. A maid getting hostile with the hero would be a big issue, so I had to get her away from Seravimia.

“Thanks, Lumié. You can wait behind me now.”

“Understood.” She bowed and went behind me, standing next to Adele. Coupled with the two soldiers and Kevin, I hoped that Seravimia and the elf sisters would feel oppressed by the difference in numbers.

I took a sip from my tea before I finally cut to the chase. “So you came to inspect the Girard territory, is that right?”

“Indeed. I periodically go around the different fiefs in the kingdom. This time, it happens to be yours, Baron Girard.”

Her inspection was quite sudden, though. With the royal family backing her, she was basically like Mito Koumon, who went around Japan’s various domains to investigate corrupt officials.

“I see. When was the last investigation of the Girard territory?”

“Around forty years ago.”

It was likely that my parents had behaved the way they did because they had figured that the hero wouldn’t make her way out to the sticks in their generation.

“It was that long ago?”

“Yes, there was such a long gap because there were many other territories that took priority.” Seravimia slowly put her cup on the table. I felt pressure coming from her; I figured she wanted to imply that we’d broken laws because they had eased their surveillance.

If only you had just forgotten about us forever.

“Well then, I would like to start the inspection, but could you first give me the relevant administrative documents concerning your domain?”

I knew she would ask, so I had prepared them in advance. I took them from the handbag I’d brought with me and put them on the table.

“I have written down everything that has happened since I became the new patriarch. Please look them over at your leisure.”

“You are well prepared.”

“Is it not natural that I would be, knowing that the hero—you, Lady Seravimia

—would be coming here?” *And I’d like you to go back home as soon as possible,* I added in my mind.

By the way, I didn’t want her to have a bad impression of me, so I didn’t hide anything—I really had written everything down. Between our financial affairs, our public order, the conflicts that had happened in the past, and so on, it’d probably take a while for her to read everything.

I took a baked sweet and waited elegantly. The elf sisters did the same, looking at Seravimia while sipping their tea. Though they had been forced to leave the Girard territory and go to the capital, they didn’t seem to hate the hero. I figured that I couldn’t hope to win them over.

Seravimia carefully read the documents one by one. Even though there were nine people in the room, it was awfully quiet. So much so that the sound of the parchment being flipped felt noisy.

“May I ask a few questions?” Seravimia said, raising her face.



If she knew about the fact that I had knowledge from the game, Seravimia might find me a nuisance and try to eliminate me. I had to be careful and not say anything weird.

“Of course.”

“Then first, why did you lower taxes?”

While the feudal lords were the ones to determine how much tax must be paid, if it was too high, they could be punished by the kingdom’s laws. The amount decided by my parents had clearly been illegal, so I had lowered them—which was something I couldn’t say out loud. If she had knowledge from the game or her past life like me, she might notice that Jack wouldn’t give such an answer. After all, Jack was known as a corrupt aristocrat. I had to act like it.

“Because it was inefficient.”

“What do you mean?”

“I chose the tax rate that would allow the people to not starve and be able to work at their best. Basically, it is the most efficient amount. More than this would either kill the peasants or lead to them evading their taxes somehow, so after a point it would actually decrease our revenue.”

If the taxes were too high, the people wouldn’t be able to live properly and it would increase the chance of a revolt, which wouldn’t get us more money. It was not very cost-efficient. Controlling the tax rate so that the people would neither die nor live too affluently—and thereby snatch their wealth away—was the proper way to be a corrupt aristocrat.

“I see...” Seravimia made an understanding expression at my very corrupt-sounding answer. I hadn’t done it for the people, but for myself. I didn’t mention the kingdom’s laws either. “Well then, next question,” she continued. The way it sounded like a police interrogation was very unpleasant. “There is a mention of a fraudulent tax collector in one of the reports.”

“Ah, yes. That man.” The man who’d stolen my precious assets. I didn’t regret beheading him at all. Some of my rage leaked out a little, so I quickly calmed myself down.

“You seem to really hate him.”

“I cannot forgive anyone who steals from me.”

With this, she should recognize me as a greedy man. My acting should have appeared very Jack-like.

“I see. So that is why you executed him in front of the villagers.”

“By executing him in front of my people, I showed everyone what would happen to anyone who went against me. The effect was immediate,” I said with a grin. For an instant, Seravimia frowned. I figured she must have been disgusted. “Is there a problem, Lady Seravimia?”

“Leaving the way you did it aside, executing him was appropriate for tax evasion of that large a scale.”

Of course it was. A little fraud would be different, but he had gone much too far. Executing him was totally legal, and even the hero agreed to that.

“So what did you want to ask then?”

“I want to know how the people reacted.” She turned toward Kevin, who was waiting in front of the door. “As a third party, I would like to hear your thoughts.”

She isn't asking me, but them?! Her unexpected action left me internally flustered. I didn't think that Kevin would betray me as things stood, but a simple slip of the tongue could allow Seravimia to forge a testimony.

Don't say anything unnecessary!

“I think that everyone agrees with my lord's judgment.”

“Do you truly think so?”

“Without a doubt.”

Kevin gave a perfectly safe answer and everything went well—or that was what I thought until Seravimia turned toward the soldiers.

“What about you?” Ludwig and the other soldier looked at each other, urging the other to take the question with their eyes. “No matter what you say, I guarantee your safety,” the hero continued. “So please, tell the truth.”

Seravimia was probably thinking that they hesitated to talk because they were afraid of me, but she was wrong. They were just bewildered by the fact that the hero would speak to them. As a noble, she should be used to that reaction from commoners. If she wasn't noticing the reason behind those reactions, her way of perceiving things was a little off.

"Then I shall be the one to answer," Ludwig said after kneeling. He was Lumie's little brother and had been growing at an amazing rate since I'd promoted him to captain. His commanding ability wasn't bad either. He was a real boon for the Girard territory, which had a severe dearth of talented people. "Just before executing the tax collector, our liege protected the village by fighting against a lesser earth dragon."

"That was in the report. Did it truly happen?"

Well, yeah, of course she wouldn't believe that I acted as a decoy to trap the lesser earth dragon, or that I killed it. She probably thought that I had exaggerated things to show off.

"It is, without a doubt, the truth. We soldiers, as well as the villagers who had been evacuated to a hill a little ways away, saw our lord battle the dragon, risking his life to protect everyone. Nobody objected to the execution of the fraudulent tax collector. Everyone thought his punishment was natural."

I'd had the villagers take refuge on that hill so that they could see me and think that it was a good thing to pay their taxes, but I hadn't expected that it would serve as testimony against Seravimia. Everything Ludwig was saying was the truth, and not because I had threatened him. Even Seravimia should understand that.

"Lying to the hero is a serious crime. Can you swear that you are telling the truth?"

"I swear I am telling the truth," Ludwig replied immediately, not giving in to Seravimia's threat.

"This is quite different..." she muttered. If I hadn't been near her, I probably wouldn't have been able to hear it.

For her to say that, she must have some intel about me that made her notice

the difference. But what intel would that be? If she noticed that I was a different Jack from the game, that might lead to my doom. At the very least, I had to hide it until I was able to determine her true objective, and whether I could make her my ally. Still, I couldn't stay on the defensive if I wanted to draw information from her.

It's a little risky, but let's try poking at it.

"What is different, exactly?" I asked.

"Ah, you heard me..." Seravimia was surprised for an instant, then she smiled menacingly. "I had heard that the patriarch of House Girard was a tyrant who violated the kingdom's laws, and that he was hated by both his people and his vassals."

If such rumors truly circulated around the capital, I would have gotten a Game Over from the hero's judgment long ago. The fact that I was still fine meant that it was a lie that she had just come up with. I didn't feel any hostility from her, so she was probably trying to test me.

"That must be about my father, the previous head of the family."

"Really?"

The way she purposefully asked something that she already knew pissed me off. "What is it that you want me to say exactly, Lady Seravimia?"

"There are many people who act as if they are good, but commit crimes behind the scenes. I cannot believe you unconditionally."

She just asserted that my words weren't worth believing. What's more, she implied that she didn't trust Kevin or Ludwig either, which was basically like making a fool of the entirety of House Girard.

Someone might get antsy here. I was certain that Kevin could endure it, but Adele was a different story. I feared that she would snap, like when she had trampled on the village chief's head, but thankfully I didn't sense any bloodlust from her direction. Maybe the discussion was a little too hard for her to follow. *Thank god she's a simple girl...*

Coming to blows with the hero would mean we lost, so I was happy about

that. However, just as I hoped for her to remain quiet, someone unexpected spoke.

“Master Jack would never do that.” Ludwig denied Seravimia’s statement, still kneeling. I had thought that if someone objected it would be Lumié, so I was pretty surprised.

“I hope that you have the resolve to back your words.” Seravimia radiated bloodlust as she stood up and walked to Ludwig.

Though she didn’t really understand the conversation, Adele sensed the danger and tried to move, but I raised my hand to stop her.

“Don’t.”

That was also directed at the elf sisters, who had begun to move as well. I kept Adele near me so that she could protect me, but I didn’t want a fight to break out. Worst case, if someone *did* pick a fight, the hero’s side had to be the one to start it. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to defend myself to the royal family, and House Girard would have to take responsibility. If it wasn’t self-defense, I would be headed straight for a bad ending.

Seravimia ignored us and took Ludwig’s chin in her hand. “Why do you trust Baron Girard so much?”

“Since he became the new lord, he’s implemented new measures to improve the people’s lives, starting with the taxes. There’s been a significant reduction in starvation, daughters being sold into slavery, and the exiling of the elderly such that families can afford to eat, among other such tragedies.” Until recently, Ludwig had been a simple soldier and had been patrolling around the domain, so he must know quite a lot about the changes I had created. “Moreover, during the fight in Third Village, he protected all of us—his men and his people both. At that moment, he definitely was our hero.”

“*Your* hero, huh...?” Even with all the praise from Ludwig—which was kinda creepy—Seravimia wasn’t having it. “What about his relations with women? I know he is not betrothed, but perhaps he plays around?”

Jack’s fiancée didn’t appear in the game until later in the story. Before her appearance, he was a real womanizer. Going to the brothel was a given, and

when he saw a cute village girl, he would lay a hand on her. He made countless women cry. While there wasn't any actual depiction of the scenes, there were a lot of 15+ CG illustrations that made you able to imagine the debauchery he partook in. I had even thought that the game should just have been 18+ and gone all the way, but I guessed the creator had their reasons.

"He is so tired from managing the territory and training his swordsmanship that he goes straight to bed at night. He has never brought a single woman into his bedroom."

"Maybe he does so in secret?"

"Adele would notice in that case, since she is one of the beastfolk. She is tasked with smelling him every day and telling my sis—*Lumié* if she catches the scent of another woman."

Wait, what?! I never heard about that!

I had thought she was just acting like a cute puppy when she hugged me every day, but *that* was the reason? Maybe I should forbid her from hugging me from now on. No, she could just smell my bed anyway, so that wouldn't change anything. Dog beastfolk had very good noses and could easily discern lingering scents.

...Tch, that means I need to only have pure and honest relations with women until I manage to stabilize the domain.

"I understand your claim. In short, he excels at politics and military affairs—though only at the level of a baron—and is fastidious when it comes to sexual matters." While she had added an unnecessary comment in there, I was glad that she had finally accepted his words. She walked away from Ludwig and looked at me. "I think we can end the discussion here. Next, I would like to visit the territory proper."

Phew, I somehow made it through the interrogation. Though the domain is still improving, the current state should be enough to avoid execution. Now I just need to show her around until she's satisfied and finish the inspection—and then it's goodbye.

We exited the mansion and boarded the large carriage in which Seravimia had arrived. We, in this case, being Seravimia, the Verdant Wind, Adele, and me. Outside were the coachman and Ludwig, who was acting as a guide. We had three people who could fight, and the same for the hero's side. There was no way we could win in a fight against them, and a surprise attack on the way wouldn't work either. My stomach hurt, but I could only endure it until everything was over.

"Nothing's changed," commented Lily, the little sister of the Verdant Wind, as she looked through the window.

"Right. It's close to our home, so I feel better here than in the capital," added Olivia, the older sister.

Since this world was based on a game, elves were just like any Japanese person would imagine them. They loved nature and lived in forests. They probably didn't like places with a lot of people like the capital. They were good in battle and used magic with the wind and water attributes. They were hostile toward all monsters, but they particularly hated goblins, and would kill them on sight no matter what. They didn't particularly like humans either, though not nearly to the same extent. Among the elves, the Verdant Wind sisters were considered eccentrics for being friendly with humans.

"I personally prefer the capital, since there are so many things there," Seravimia said happily, which surprised me. She had been on edge in the parlor, but now she was like a town girl you could find anywhere.

So she's a normal person when she isn't working as the hero, huh?

She talked pleasantly with the elf sisters for a while, but the moment I entered her sight, her attitude changed and her eyes narrowed.

You're being way too obvious. If you hate me so much, just go back to the capital already.

"By the way, what about your debt to Count Belmond?"

She purposely waited until I lowered my guard before getting right back into the interrogation!

"I am impressed that you have heard of it."

“I did some preliminary investigation before coming here.”

I couldn't underestimate her ability to gather intel if she was able to find out about House Girard's debt when even I hadn't known about it. I could feel her determination to find my weakness and drive me to the wall. I really couldn't take her lightly.

“Rest assured, I am currently paying it back in installments.”

“...So you do intend to repay it.”

“Of course. It has to do with the people's trust in me.”

Did she find that surprising? Game Jack would have shirked the payment, so maybe she perceived it as a difference between the game and reality. Adele being with me wasn't weird, as it was possible in the story, but Ludwig's testimony and the debt repayment were quite the departure. She might have noticed that I had knowledge from the game—not like I had thought I would be able to hide it entirely anyway. After all, if I had acted like Jack would have, the lesser earth dragon would have destroyed a part of the domain, which would have been confiscated from me for not repaying the debt.

“The people's trust in you... From the rumors I have heard about you, I did not think you would take much stock in such things.”

Rude, much? I won't fall for your provocation, you know? I took Adele's hand before she could make a move.

“Lady Seravimia. If anyone heard that the hero was coming to visit them, I am certain that they would *clean themselves* properly,” I said with a perfect corrupt aristocrat smile. I basically implied that I had changed my plans and paid back the debt only because of her visit.

“I see... I will leave it at that, then.”

Her answer bothered me a little, but it seemed she had accepted my explanation for now. Bored of me for the moment, she went back to talking with the Verdant Wind.

* * *

The inspection of First Village and Second Village had gone well. There was

nothing much but fields to see anyway, so Seravimia only talked with the village chiefs a little and that was it. I hadn't been allowed to be present so I didn't know what they had talked about, but nothing should have come up that would make me lose my domain.

We'd now arrived at Third Village. Seravimia got off the carriage, and the Verdant Wind followed her. They observed the village being rebuilt as Adele and I waited behind them in case the hero had a question.

"I see that you even dispatched carpenters. The reconstruction seems to be going well."

"The village was completely destroyed, so it was a necessary measure if I wanted them to reestablish their livelihoods—to be able to work and pay their taxes again. You could call what I did an investment." I emphasized that I didn't do it for the people, but rationally spent money to make money. It was different from what the in-game Jack would do, but our goal of living in luxury was the same, so she shouldn't find it too out of character.

"An investment... Is that the case for this too?" She pointed at some villagers who were relishing bowls of soup, provided by the soldiers I'd left stationed here.

"Working in the fields is physical labor. If I want them to work efficiently, I think this is the appropriate thing to do."

"Yes... You might be right." From her reaction, I wasn't sure if she agreed with me or not.

After walking around the whole village, we entered the forest, and after a while, we reached the hidden field.

"Lily, Olivia, can you explore the forest for me?" Seravimia said.

"We can?!" Lily responded cheerfully, like a kid who had their parents buy them their favorite toy. She seemed truly happy to be able to have her fill of nature in the Girard territory—it had probably been a while.

"There aren't any forests in the capital, so you should enjoy it while you can."

Lily didn't even wait for Seravimia to finish her sentence before running into

the woods. Olivia sighed at her little sister's attitude before following her.

"Could you go with them so that they do not get lost?" Seravimia asked Adele.

Adele looked at me, not knowing what to do. Well, I *did* want to figure out Seravimia's true objective, so it was a good opportunity. I nodded to her, and she ran after the Verdant Wind. I was now alone with Seravimia.

"Thank you for your cooperation." She appreciated me going along with her.

"No, this is nothing. I wished to speak with you in private anyway, Lady Seravimia." Be it her objective for coming here, whether she had knowledge from the game, or if she truly was my enemy, I intended to discover it all here and now.

"Speak with me in private?" Seravimia slowly approached me with a smile. As she was here as a proxy for the royal family, she wouldn't kill me, but I planned to stay on guard nonetheless. "What a coincidence. I also wanted to speak with *you*, Baron Girard. Just the two of us," she said, her mouth next to my ear.

"What did you want to discuss?"

"Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat."

She finally revealed that she has game knowledge! I screamed in my mind, but managed to keep a poker face and didn't answer.

"Even if you stay silent, I know that I am right. After all, you are the only person doing something completely different from the game."

"What do you mean?" Even though she boldly used the term "game," I played dumb, trying to get as much intel as I could from her. I planned to act like this as long as possible.

"I think you obtained your game knowledge around when you put your parents in their comas. Since then, your behavior has completely changed. Those around you might think that your personality changed because of the shock from what happened to your parents, but you cannot deceive me."

"I do not understand what you—" I tried to feign ignorance, but before I knew it, a knife's tip was pressed against my stomach. If I screamed, it was highly probable that the Verdant Wind or Adele would come back, so I had thought

that she wouldn't resort to violence—but she had a shorter fuse than I had expected. Apparently talking was too much of a pain, so she elected to use force instead.

“Could you stop playing innocent?” I could feel her bloodlust now. I had known she would have a lot of mana, but the sheer difference in quantity between us was inconceivable. I couldn't help but be overwhelmed.

My entire body was drenched in sweat as the words “Bad End” flashed in my mind. I didn't think I could win in a fight. Nevertheless, that didn't mean that obeying her guaranteed my safety. If her objective truly was the Girard territory, going along with her might result in the loss of my domain.

“If you do not tell me the truth, I will kill you here and now.”

“Your standing as the hero might worsen if you purposefully kill a baron, Lady Seravimia.”

“You may not know about this, considering how far out in the country you are, but there are many bad rumors about you in the capital. That you do not repay debts, or that you make your people suffer with heavy taxation, or that you are colluding with enemy countries, to name a few.”

What the hell are these rumors...? The worst one was about colluding with enemy nations. Betraying the kingdom meant going straight for capital punishment, coupled with a lot of torture. I was certain that I had read through all the past documents in the mansion, but I couldn't deny the possibility that proof of collusion with other countries was still hidden somewhere, and I just hadn't discovered it yet. So that meant the rumor might be true. However, I couldn't admit to that even if it was the case.

“These rumors are nonsensical,” I declared without showing any agitation. My life was on the line, so even if my opponent was the hero, I was going to keep a resolute attitude no matter what.

“Of course. I know that they are lies, or about the previous head of House Girard... However, if I were to say that the current head is betraying the kingdom, what do you think would happen?”

“I would deny your claim.”

“Then I just need to kill you before that. I am entitled to do so, after all.”

In this world, human rights weren't guaranteed to all. Just like how I hadn't listened to the tax collector before executing him, Seravimia could just make up proof of my culpability and deal with me herself. It was a world where the strong oppressed the weak.

Considering the current situation, I should tell the truth, but I didn't want to until I knew her objective. “...Then I would resist with all I have.”

“I truly like your attitude. Your personality and your ability to keep a secret are acceptable too, but... I want to test you a little more.”

She pushed my chest, making me take a few steps back. Once I was far enough, Seravimia put her knife away and drew her sword instead. It was the hero's exclusive weapon, and it was hard to determine its reach because of its semitransparent blade. What's more, pouring mana into it would increase its sharpness to the point that it could cut boulders like butter. Basically, my protective equipment was useless, and coupled with the gap in our abilities, I was in a real crisis.

“If you kill me, we will not be able to talk,” I said while drawing my Twin Hydra Blades.

“I only want to confirm your strength.” She ignored me and lunged forward in a thrust.

You're aiming for my freaking heart! You're totally trying to kill me!

I twisted my body to avoid it, but she followed by swinging her sword to the side, so I blocked it with one of my own blades. A heavy impact rang through my entire body. If my weapon had been normal, it would have been destroyed.

“Did you not just try to kill me?”

“I was certain that *this much* would not be enough to kill you.” She kicked my stomach the moment she ended her sentence, blowing me away.

I rolled a few times on the field and stood up. When I looked back at Seravimia, dozens of arrows of lightning were floating around her. Then with a crackling sound, they all came flying at me one by one. I figured that she truly

was testing me as, otherwise, she would have shot them all at once. Trying to ward them off with my Twin Hydra Blades would just electrocute me, so I leaped to the side and rolled on the ground to avoid them.

The moment I finished dodging them all and stood up, Seravimia provoked me. “You can counterattack, you know?”

Okay, you’ve pissed me off. Observation time is over—now I’m gonna crush you!

“Certainly. I will be using my full power, however, so do not die, if you please.”

“Good. I wonder how long you will be able to keep that attitude.”

The tip of her sword was aimed for my head, so I moved to the side to avoid it and counterattacked with a roundhouse kick to her gut. She leaped back at the same time, though, and I didn’t feel any impact. She most likely wasn’t hurt at all.

“Shadow Bind.”

I took advantage of the newly opened distance between us to use my binding spell. My shadow stretched and tried to coil itself around Seravimia’s limbs, but it vanished instantly. She had probably released the mana in her body to resist my magic. I could try blinding and sleeping spells, but she would nullify those too.

Which means that I have to resort to close combat! I released the mana from my organs in my forehead, chest, and abdomen, spreading my mana all around my body to drastically strengthen my physical abilities.

“Die!” I yelled, sprinting forward. As I’d hoped, Seravimia took a stance, waiting for my arrival. But instead—

“Shadow Walk.” I sank into my shadow and immediately emerged from Seravimia’s—just behind her.

She shouldn’t be able to react to that! I poured mana into the Twin Hydra Blades, coating them in poison, and tried to stab her back, but I struck only air. She did a back somersault and ended up behind me instead.

“It was a good idea. You almost had me,” she whispered in my ear.

“You’re being way too complacent!” I swung one of my blades while turning back, but nobody was there anymore.

As I glanced around, my surroundings suddenly darkened, so I looked up only to find Seravimia’s foot aiming for my head. I immediately crossed my twin swords to block it. Then, before she could land properly and regain her posture, I quickly launched a front kick at her face. This time I felt the impact. I took some distance and glanced at her. Her nose was red and streaming blood.

“You are far stronger than I expected you to be. Did slaying that lesser earth dragon make you level up?”

Defeating living beings strengthened your mana-storing organs, as well as your base physical abilities and how much you could enhance them with mana. That was how the leveling system from the game was treated in reality.

Seravimia wiped her nosebleed with her arm and continued. “Do you have a trump card? If you want to use it, now is the time.”

Even though I had managed to hurt her, she was still totally composed. Well, all her provocations were really starting to piss me off, so I was going to give her what she wanted: my trump card.

“Don’t look down on me just because I’m a rural baron!” As I flashed her my middle finger—she was probably the only person other than me to understand its meaning in this world—to draw her attention, Adele slashed at Seravimia from behind.

Beastfolk had far better hearing than humans. Having heard the noise from our battle, Adele had left the elf sisters and come to my aid. Thanks to the fact that she had been focused on me, Seravimia didn’t dodge in time, and blood spurted from her back.

Grimacing from the pain, Seravimia took some distance from Adele and readied her sword. “Was she not supposed to be guiding my comrades?”

“She sensed that her master was in danger and rushed back.” I’d dropped my polite tone for a while now. She might be the hero, but right now, I didn’t want to treat her as my superior. “It’s two against one now. How about giving up?” I

boasted, lightly embracing Adele from behind to show Seravimia that I would never hand Adele over.

“Very good. I also like how confident you are.” She didn’t mind the blood flowing from her back and rushed forward to slash at me with a smile. I pushed Adele away to the side and blocked her sword with my Twin Hydra Blades. Now free, Adele once again attacked Seravimia’s back with her own twin swords. However, at the moment of truth, Seravimia spun back and blocked them with her blade.

“How dare you attack Master Jack! Unforgivable!” Adele bared her anger at Seravimia. It might have been the first time I’d seen her so angry.

“I would expect no less from Ady. What a shame—I wanted her for myself.”

The two began a fierce exchange of blows. I thought about joining the fray, but the most I could do was follow them with my eyes—I couldn’t find an opening. Adele’s rage increased the speed of her swords after each new strike, and she began to push Seravimia back. She was showing that she truly deserved the title of “the strongest character.” However, just as I was thinking how glad I was to have made her my ally, the hero went above and beyond.

“I hope you can endure this.” Seravimia’s mana suddenly spiked. She had only been using the bare minimum until now.

With far more speed than before, Seravimia warded off Adele’s dual swords and kicked her. Still, even as she was blown away, Adele didn’t give up and threw one of her swords—but Seravimia easily parried it. I used the slight opening to thrust at her with my Twin Hydra Blades, but she let go of her weapon and seized my arms.

“You thought you could win? Well, sorry to disappoint you,” she said in a truly delighted tone before throwing me toward Adele, who was on her way to attack Seravimia once again. Adele couldn’t avoid me, so she let go of her remaining sword and gently caught me. Unfortunately, she couldn’t kill the momentum, and we both rolled onto the ground.

“You two certainly are familiar!” Seravimia shouted as she raised her right leg overhead and brought it down, aiming for my head with the heel of her iron boot.

She can use martial arts too?!

Adele crossed her arms to block the blow and groaned in pain.

“*Fireball.*” Seravimia conjured a flaming orb before launching it directly at me.

I warded it off with my Twin Hydra Blades, changing its trajectory. The moment it reached the ground, it exploded. The hot wind burned my skin and the cloud of dust worsened my vision. I couldn’t see, but I remembered where Seravimia had been, so I took a step that way and swung up my twin swords from below. However, once again I met nothing but air.

“Do not move,” Seravimia said from behind.

I turned back, and when the dust cleared, I found her strangling Adele. Seravimia was holding her from behind, using her arm to press on Adele’s throat, so it would be difficult for her to break off on her own.

“I can see that you trained diligently without slacking off, Baron Girard. Now, can we have a serious discussion?”

Adele was going to be a key piece for me from now on, so I couldn’t sacrifice her just to attack Seravimia. I suppressed my irritation and accepted the proposal. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Hmm... Well, it would be boring to talk about the same thing, so we should change the subject.”

Adele was still trying her best to escape as Seravimia was talking, but she couldn’t break out of the hold. Her face grew paler and paler as Seravimia tightened the pressure on her neck.

“Stop moving, Adele!”

When Adele heard my order, her dog ears twitched, and she stopped struggling. Realizing that Adele would stop resisting, Seravimia loosened her hold, allowing Adele to breathe.

Now that her hostage was obedient, Seravimia continued. “Well then, first question: What do you want to do with your domain?”

It was a pretty vague question that could refer to many things. I worried about my answer for an instant, but because I didn’t trust her yet, I decided to

give a reply that seemed appropriate. “I want to govern it in a way that will make House Girard prosper. Isn’t that obvious?”

“You want prosperity... Not a concrete answer.”

“Well, your question was vague, and so was my reply.”

“I see. Indeed, I should have been clearer.” She agreed, then changed the content of her inquiry. “Currently, the Girard territory is impoverished because of the heavy taxation imposed on its people until recently. One wrong move, and the economy will collapse. You do understand this, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well then, how do you plan to break through this situation?”

This time the question was concrete and made it easy to understand what she wanted to know. It was a pretty good one to determine my thoughts. Game Jack would say that he would just play around until the domain fell to ruin, but I was different. She would easily notice if I lied, so I decided to tell the truth.

“Just as I’ve said before, I want to improve the lifestyles of the people of my fief and create an environment in which they can work earnestly.”

People weren’t machines. If you exploited them, their efficiency would fall and decrease your income. Naturally, it was the same for taxes. That was why I had lowered them, so that the people could imagine their lives improving as long as they worked diligently.

“I see, I see. And?”

“Then after taking the time to slowly recover our finances, I plan to repair the facilities in the territory and cultivate new lands. In particular, I have my eye on the forest near Fourth Village.” Between the damaged bridges, the unmaintained roads, and the forests infested with monsters that not even the adventurers dared to enter, it would take a while to improve everything. In fact, I would probably only be able to handle a part of it—the rest would have to be done by future generations.

“Taking your time, huh? What a steady plan.”

She was basically implying that it wasn’t Jack-like. Anyway, I was worried

about Adele, so I wanted to end this discussion fast.

“Done with the questions? If so, release Adele.”

“No, there is something else I would like to talk about.”

Just as I was preparing myself for the next topic, however, the elf sisters returned. They noticed that we were facing each other down and rushed toward Seravimia.

“Seravimia! What happened? You’re bleeding!” Olivia shouted while her sister, Lily, just watched us with interest.

“We just played a little!” Seravimia released Adele before hugging the elf sisters. She took a potion from Olivia and drank it to heal her nose and the cuts on her back.

Adele retrieved her twin swords and stood in front of me. She was on guard, but we weren’t going to fight anymore.

“The battle is over. Sheathe your swords,” I said while putting my hand on her shoulder.

“B-But, Master!”

“You don’t trust me?”

“I would never doubt you!”

“Then obey.”

“...Understood.” Adele reluctantly returned her twin blades to their scabbards. She didn’t give up on trying to protect me, though—or rather, she wouldn’t stop clinging to me. I was going to complain, but Seravimia reopened the conversation.

“I have one last question. What is your ambition?”

I figured she wanted to know how I would act in the future. If I replied that I wanted to become king, like in the game, she would probably kill me. Well, not that I had any ambitions like that anyway.

“I want to live an extravagant and luxurious life in my territory, just like any other noble. I don’t wish for anything more.”

“Really?”

“I have no reason to lie.”

As it was the truth, I had boldly declared it, and it seemed to have worked as Seravimia didn't inquire further and just laughed.

She walked up next to me and whispered, “I will tell you my objective in coming here another day.” Then she went back to the Verdant Wind. “Hey, Livy. Hey, Lilily,” she called out to Olivia and Lily. “You just went into the forest, right? Then show me around.” And so they left.

I still didn't know what her objective was, but I guessed that, at the very least, the hero's inspection was over.

After that little tussle, Seravimia was pretty docile. She just made her observations of each village with the Verdant Wind and didn't try anything. Well, I'd been kinda convinced that she wouldn't try to attack me again. After all, her questions mostly had been about me and what I would do. I'd been so focused on the epilogue after the bad endings that I'd been under the impression that the only reason she would want to come here was to take over the Girard territory. But in fact, she had probably only wanted to know if I had memories of my previous life and knowledge from the game. I didn't know how she intended to use the intel she'd obtained, but if nothing else, I should have avoided the current problem successfully.

* * *

Finally we came to the day of Seravimia's departure, when she would return to the capital. She had come to my office to say goodbye. Currently, we were the only two in the room. Everyone else was outside in the hallway.

“How was the Girard territory?” I asked.

“A good place with abundant and bountiful nature.”

Putting it another way, that was all there was to it. It was perfect for elves, but for young people it was boring and uneventful. If it was like Japan and you could freely move around the country, there would be a severe shortage of youngsters here.

“I also confirmed that the territory was improving,” she added.

“So you will report that there is no problem here?”

“Of course. I will make a good report to the royal family.”

Phew, with this, the “hero’s visit” event is over. As long as Seravimia reports the truth, all the bad rumors should go away. Considering that I couldn’t go to the capital, it was pretty important for me. As long as my reputation—and my domain’s—improved, there should be fewer nobles who looked down on me.

“It was well worth doing my best for the territory after becoming the new baron.”

“I will also convey your efforts to the royal family.”

“Thank you.” As I spoke, I realized something—she was being too kind. Though it was true that the territory was getting better, it didn’t change the fact that it was still in a bad shape. There were a lot of things she could complain about, and yet, she wouldn’t report them. There must be a catch. “Why are you being so generous?”

“Because Olivia and Lily love these lands.”

What an obvious lie. As if I could believe that.

“Is that your only reason?”

“Well...” Seravimia drew her pretty face near mine. I could smell that faint sweet scent that was exclusive to young women. “You are a precious comrade with knowledge from the game. I want you to cooperate with me in the future, so I have to accommodate you. You understand what I mean, right?”

You can try all you want, but seduction won’t work on me.

Her discovery of my game knowledge was within my expectations, so I didn’t panic. “And you want me to ignore what you did to me?”

“Yes. In exchange, I will lend you the power of the hero. It should be a great boon for you. So, want to work together?”

Honestly, it was a pretty attractive offer. The hero’s power would be a great help for the Girard territory’s prosperity. It wasn’t like she had insulted me

publicly, and our interests matched, so I didn't mind forgetting our quarrel and cooperating with her—ha! As if I would act so magnanimous!

"After what you did to me, I have no desire to cooperate with you." In the first place, she never even told me her objective for coming here. How could I believe her? She really took me for a fool.

"You are as prideful as Jack was in the game. I like that too. I feel like we will get along just fine."

Ah, it's hopeless. We're just not on the same wavelength. "I do not intend to get along with you either."

"No worries. Before long, you will want to borrow my power. We will meet again then."

I'm gonna want to borrow her power? She knows something. Something that even I, a fellow player, don't know about.

I couldn't let her leave without at least getting some intel. "Could you tell me your objective, Lady Seravimia?" I felt like she would answer if I asked right now.

"Well..." She stopped smiling and became practically expressionless. "I want to use the Girard territory to create the perfect world."

"You what...?" I was so surprised that my response came out rather curt.

I'd expected her to say "take over the country," but "creating the perfect world"? No normal player would think like that. It was as if she thought she was God... Wait, God? Of course, there was this possibility too: maybe Seravimia was the creator of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. In that case, it wouldn't be strange for her to think of herself as God and to want to create the perfect world—and the reason she was targeting the Girard territory was because she knew the hidden backstories of the game. I felt like I was finally starting to understand her.

"What exactly do you intend to do?" I asked.

"I cannot answer that unless you decide to collaborate with me." She got tight-lipped all of a sudden. It must be a secret that she didn't want to reveal

unless she could trust me. “To make this world perfect, the Girard territory is necessary. How about creating it together?”

Being able to use the hero’s power to develop the Girard territory would be a massive help. However, as they say, if something sounds too good to be true, there must be a catch. And, more than anything, I didn’t trust Seravimia—and I didn’t want to be betrayed again.

“I plan to make the Girard territory a place where *I* can enjoy a comfortable life. Please look for somewhere else, Lady Seravimia.”

“Oh? To think you would refuse my offer...” For the first time, she looked surprised. I figured that she didn’t think I would refuse after being shown how overwhelming the difference between our abilities was. Sensing her bloodlust, I prepared myself. “I can kill you here, you know?” she threatened, conjuring her lightning arrows around herself once again.

Apparently, the only way she knew to make people obey her was coercion. She might be able to create games, but she had no leadership skills.

“Go ahead! Do it!” I stopped being polite and provoked her with a sneer, spreading my arms wide.

“I really will do it.”

And yet, she didn’t. She was hesitating to attack me.

“Stop yapping and just do it already.” The instant I finished my sentence, an arrow of lightning flew past my face and stuck into the wall behind me. Blood spilled from the cut on my cheek.

I had won the bet. Seravimia couldn’t kill me.

In the first place, her actions didn’t make sense. If the Girard territory was necessary to create the perfect world, then she would have killed me already. But she hadn’t, and she was trying to make me her comrade instead. That could only mean one thing: to make the ideal world, Jack—the game’s protagonist—was indispensable. She needed me alive. She could threaten me, but not kill me. That was the hero’s weakness. Even though she had overwhelming power, she could never win against me. What delightful news! I couldn’t stop smiling.

“What’s the problem? You just need to aim here.” I grinned, tapping my index finger on my forehead.

While she looked frustrated, Seravimia didn’t do anything. No, she *couldn’t* do anything.



“...You have a nasty personality,” she said, admitting her defeat and taking control of her radiating bloodlust. She took a breath to relax and continued. “Then I will not ask for an answer right now. I will wait until you change your mind.”

“Suit yourself. In the meanwhile, I’m gonna get stronger.”

“I look forward to that.” Seravimia wasn’t perturbed by my declaration of war and immediately left the office.

I won’t forget the humiliation from the other day. I’ll definitely make you cry and beg for my pardon!

Epilogue: I Won't Give Up on Luxury

Peace returned to the Girard territory once Seravimia had returned to the capital. However, that peace was only temporary. As long as she wanted to create the perfect world, she would come back—and we would have to fight. So until then, I had to find more allies and obtain the power to oppose her.

“Should you not take a rest, Master Jack?” Lumié asked. I was reviewing the problems of the domain in my office. She had brought me a light meal with black tea.

“You’re right,” I agreed and took the teacup. Then I stood up and looked at the courtyard through the window. “Everyone’s doing their best today too.”

All the soldiers were training, with Adele as their instructor. Their movements had greatly improved, and Ludwig’s growth in particular was especially outstanding. His current abilities were just a little below my own now. When you thought about how he had been a mediocre soldier until recently, his improvement was astounding.

“My little brother has grown so much thanks to you, Master Jack. Thank you very much,” Lumié said, standing next to me. Her eyes were full of kindness as she watched her brother. Though to be honest, I felt like there was *too* much love in those eyes, even considering that she was his sister.

Anyway, I couldn’t imagine what her actual thoughts were, but there was no doubt that Ludwig was truly important to her. If he had died in the battle at Third Village, she might have left me pretty quickly. The fact that she could disappear in an instant, even though she had been with me since my childhood, made me realize just how fragile human relations were. The only things I could trust were my beliefs and my strength. I had to interact with others on the basis that they could leave me someday. I couldn’t trust people too much, and definitely couldn’t rely on them wholeheartedly.

“He’s improved because he made the effort. I only gave him the opportunity to do it.” While my heart was stone-cold, I offered Ludwig some praise to curry his doting older sister’s favor.

As expected, she was moved, and her eyes moistened a little. It wasn't a maid's reaction, but an older sister's. "Thank you very much."

Sensing all the feelings put into her words, I figured that as long as Ludwig was safe, she wouldn't betray me. With this, I knew that I could trust at least one of my two close retainers for a while. She should work devotedly for me.

I wasn't done yet, though, so I gave another push. "Go give the soldiers something to eat and drink."

She usually acted separately from her brother and had few opportunities to talk with him. By giving her an excuse to see him, I played the compassionate master—and oh *boy* was it effective. She was surprised for an instant, then she switched to a smile so charming it almost captivated me.

Don't misunderstand. That smile is for her brother, not me, I told myself.

"I am grateful for your consideration."

"Well, you're always helping me, after all."

She wasn't a game character, but a person with feelings. Affinity and loyalty weren't something you could improve with side quests, but through everyday behavior. So of course I would compliment her from time to time.

"Well then, excuse me." Lumié bowed and left the office. She was most likely heading for the kitchen to prepare more food before going to the courtyard.

I didn't have any interest in seeing people getting along, so I stopped watching through the window and took out my father's diary from my desk drawer. The front half was filled with the things that had happened after he'd become patriarch, but the later half was blank. The passage just before that was about the betrayal of the maid who had taken care of him since his childhood, and how he had killed her. The writing was blurry, probably because he wrote it through his tears. The last two lines were:

I'm never trusting anyone again. I don't feel like doing anything anymore.

I'm just going to do whatever I want from now on. To forget it all.

These words conveyed my father's suffering. I still thought that Jack's father was the worst kind of person, but I could understand the pain from the betrayal

of someone important to you. By the way, a later investigation proved that the maid had acted on her own judgment to destroy House Girard; she hadn't been brainwashed by magic.

Yet Kevin had said that someone *had* been brainwashed, and they had killed the maid. While the result was the same, the events were different. The maid *did* die, but not in the way he had explained. I guessed he had lied so that I wouldn't hesitate to execute the tax collector, but I couldn't understand his real intentions. I didn't know what this discrepancy indicated, but it was enough to make me certain that I couldn't trust Kevin. Or at least, I trusted him less than Lumié.

"What a pain." I put the diary back on the desk and sat on my chair.

Unlike Lumié, who had an easy-to-understand weakness, Kevin didn't have any close friends, so I couldn't gather intel on him. Not being able to find a way to control him was nerve-wracking. I really wanted to deal with him quickly, but I was far too busy with all the problems in the domain. Between the monster raids from the forests, the deterioration of the roads that destroyed the traffic network, and our serious lack of funds (among other things), there were a lot of items I had to prioritize. I would have to search for his weakness and why he had lied later.

"Which one should I tackle first?" I mused, looking at the petitions from the town and villages.

A few of them were connected to side quests, and one in particular interested me: *"A rotten smell is coming from the sewers. Would it be possible to improve the cleaning process?"*

It was a time-limited side quest where goblins had taken residence in the sewers, killing the animals inside. They left the corpses lying around too, so if you didn't do anything, an epidemic would break out in town. It eventually infected twenty percent of the population, greatly reducing manpower and causing tons of problems. Of course, that meant less revenue, and an economic collapse. Moreover, no one in the domain could make a cure, nor did we have the money to import some from another fief, so the epidemic would continue for years until reaching a bad ending. Basically, it was a side quest that taught if

you weren't careful about your people's health, you'd lose, as well as just a bad ending flag in its own right.

However, that side quest wasn't just a nuisance. It was the next one where you could get a new ally after Adele—Gwynt. He was a scout, specialized in tracking, hiding, and covert actions. He was a rarity among the combat-type allies in the game, so I wanted to quickly get in touch and make him my ally.

“Well, I guess I'll take care of this one next.”

Of course, I would also solve other problems on the side and continue my training with Adele. I was determined to break all the bad ending flags that were creeping my way.

I'm definitely gonna survive and live my life in the lap of luxury—as aristocratically and extravagantly as possible!

Extra Story: The Fangame *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*

I turned on my computer and the screen blinked to life. The desktop displayed a short time later, and I clicked on the icon of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat* to launch the game. Oppressive music introduced the title screen, where Jack was sitting on a gorgeous chair with his legs crossed, and Adele was standing next to him. The illustration really gave him a villainous vibe.

I moved my cursor onto the “Load” button and selected my last save to continue.

The screen blackened for an instant, then the picture of Jack raising an axe overhead and his fiancée sitting on the ground in fear appeared. It was the scene just before her execution. Jack, who had just fled from his parents trying to assassinate him, had decided to kill her after witnessing her having an affair with another man. He must have been enraged, and as someone who had divorced for the same reason, I truly understood how he felt.

“Please! You’re the only one I truly love!” His fiancée begged for her life, but Jack remained impassive. The violent rage inside him must have killed his other emotions. He didn’t even look like he thought the person in front of him was a human. “If you pardon me, I’ll devote my entire life to you. I’ll do anything.” The fiancée’s illustration changed to a thin smile. I figured that she couldn’t smile properly because of the fear, and for some reason, her face irritated me.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes! I’ll do anything you wish!” Once she saw Jack’s expression turn amicable, her smile became natural as she thought that she had persuaded him.

“Well, that’s a nice thing to hear.”

Even though he should punish her for betraying him, he seemed like he was going to forgive her. I was really curious about what would happen, and my hand couldn’t stop clicking the mouse. Would he excuse her infidelity, or would he execute her? I looked forward to seeing Jack’s decision.

“Then...die!” Jack shouted, swinging down his axe and decapitating his

fiancée.

That's it. That's what I wanted. Wildly extreme games that ignore all those official producers' regulations!

Even watching the head of his fiancée rolling on the ground didn't cool down Jack's rage. After that, he went back to the Girard territory and killed his parents. He made it look like his father died from illness and received permission from the royal family to become the new head of House Girard. He didn't think about what would happen when his lie would be discovered. He had stopped caring about the drawbacks. He wasn't moving on logic anymore, but purely on his feelings.

Before I knew it, I started feeling an affinity with Jack.

* * *

Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat was a strategy and simulation game in which you alternated between battle sections, where you fought against enemies—and management sections, where you governed the domain. The story progressed before and after each fight, whether you won perfectly or lost most of your soldiers.

Charmed by the prologue, I spent more than ten straight hours playing until finally reaching the midgame.

I was currently playing a management part, but the choices given to develop the territory were kinda weird and disturbing: hunt slaves, create illegal drugs, make a backroom deal, increase taxes, and so on.

Well, I guessed that after having been betrayed by his beloved, Jack had decided to live however he wanted without caring about properly managing his fief. The creator's intent was most likely for the player to play in a way that didn't attract the attention of the hero or the royal family.

During the management parts, you could also talk with your allies and improve their affinity. Because the number of actions was limited to four, I used two to max out the affinity of my favorite character, Adele—and the last two to create illegal drugs and make a backroom deal to net some profit. The domain's

public order deteriorated, but I didn't care. I'd let the soldiers deal with that.

Anyway, done with my actions for the section, I clicked on the button to switch to the battle part, and the story continued.

"Why are you leaving me, Lumié?!"

A blonde maid stood at the entrance of the mansion. She had two big bags at her feet, so it was easy to guess that she was going far away.

"Please permit me to quit this job," Lumié said with a hollow voice. Her expression was that of someone who had lost something important.

"I want to know why!" Being his personal maid since childhood, she must have been awfully special to Jack. That would explain his persistence.

"I have lost my reason to serve this house."

"I'm still here!"

"So what?"

Jack gasped, and the illustration changed to Lumié staring at him with contempt. Her eyes were cold, as if she were looking at trash. "You are misunderstanding something. I did not serve House Girard for you."

"Then for whom?"

"Think about it on your own. I do not intend to tell you myself." She took her bags and left the mansion. She didn't even look back. She probably didn't have any lingering affection at all.

As for Jack, he had fallen to his knees in tears. After being betrayed by his parents and fiancée, now it was Lumié's turn to leave him. Of course he would be sad—all the people who had been important to him had abandoned him, one after another. His heart must be in shreds.

"Why... Why?!" he shouted, miserably striking his fist on the ground.

After a while, he stopped crying and stood up. His glare had worsened, and his expression made it look like something in him had broken. I had a hunch that if another similar thing happened to him, Jack would never go back to his

past self.

“I wanna hunt!” He wasn’t talking about wild game, but people. He wanted to torment others to distract himself from his sorrow.

As Jack, Adele, and a few soldiers left the mansion and climbed a mountain, the screen changed to a battle map. The enemies were bandits. I wasn’t particularly good at strategy games, so I mainly used Adele, the strongest character, to go straight into the opponent’s camp, then had the soldiers follow her.

Damn, they’re pretty tough for some mere bandits.

Jack’s soldiers were easily defeated, even the captain. It had become a war of attrition. I could load from my last save if I wanted, but for some reason, I felt like Jack wished for a fight that destroyed him, so I decided to continue. Now that there weren’t any soldiers anymore, I moved Jack to fight against the bandits. When only the boss was left, I used the combo of Jack’s binding spell and Adele’s slashing attack to kill him.

The result screen with the rewards appeared. Considering I had lost around one hundred soldiers, you couldn’t say the recompenses were worth the trouble.

“Hmph. These small fry can’t even kill me,” Jack muttered as he looked down at the bandits’ corpses.

Hearing his words that made it look like he wished for his own death, Adele looked at him anxiously. “Master Jack...”

“Don’t make a face like that. You’re going to stay with me until the end, right?”

“Of course! I will live with you, and die with you.” Because Jack had saved her from a trap that would have killed her, and because she had a strong sense of duty, Adele stayed on Jack’s side no matter what misdeeds he committed. She was the last solace in his life.

“Don’t go back on your word. I’ll have you follow me into hell.”

“I will accompany you anywhere.”

Then the screen blackened and switched to the management section. Choices appeared around Jack in his office, but because I was curious about what would happen next, I selected them at random to finish quickly and clicked on the button to continue with the next battle part.

“Master Jack!” Kevin hurriedly entered the office with parchment in his hand.

“You’re too loud. What’s the problem?”

“Did you truly declare war on our neighboring territory?!”

“Ah, that?” Jack said with a sneer. “I want to expand the domain, so I picked a fight with them. It’s as simple as that.”

How absurd! He wants to attack the neighboring territory without even a proper reason?!

“You must reconsider! The royal family and the other nobles are going to intervene!”

“So what? I just need to kill them all. Then I’ll be the king.”

Man, he’s nuts! That’s lit! I’d always loved protagonists who abused their power, because their madness was surprising and thrilling at the same time.

“This is reckless. Please, reconsider.”

“No.”

“House Girard might fall.”

“I don’t care about House Girard. I just want to do whatever I please. And right now, I want violence.” Jack’s last words were the coup de grâce, and Kevin shut his mouth. Jack then stood from his chair. “I’m gonna hunt. Bring me three women.”

“Understood.”

Pleased with the answer, Jack walked to the door of the office and put his hand on the handle.

“Incidentally, Master Jack... What about your child?” Kevin asked before Jack could exit the room.

Jack turned back and said, “Ah, the thing from that time with the peasant? Kill

it, along with its mother.”

He had used his authority to impregnate a woman, and now that he was done with her, he wanted her dead... He truly was a villain.

“Certainly. I will personally take care of them.”

“I’m leaving it to you.” Jack left the room.

The illustration of Kevin silently seeing him off left quite the impression.

The screen faded to black, then the battle map appeared. Jack didn’t participate—he was too busy making out with women behind the scenes—so I used Adele and the newly employed soldiers to kill the people who were planning a revolt. This time the enemies were weak, so it was pretty easy. I checked the rewards, then proceeded to the management section.

Back in his office, Jack found a letter on his desk. Kevin had decided to serve another house and left. Jack silently tore it up and threw the scraps on the ground.

“Clean that up,” he said. But nobody answered. Adele was training outside, so he was currently alone. He clicked his tongue and sat on his chair.

Choices appeared on the screen, but they were a little different from usual.

Aim for the throne.

Ally with a neighboring country and destroy the Valzza Kingdom.

Continue living extravagantly until 80% of your people die.

Send assassins after Kevin and Lumié, then commit suicide.

I didn’t need to think long before realizing these four choices would lead to different routes. After being betrayed by his two most trusted retainers, Jack was getting desperate. None of the choices were something a sane person would do. Actually, speaking of which, what the hell? Committing suicide would obviously lead to a bad ending! Basically, I had to choose between the two extremes of either trying to become king, or destroying the kingdom entirely. I needed to think about it a little.

I had been playing for dozens of hours straight, so I was hungry. *Guess I’ll*

decide after I've eaten, I thought as I stood. I suddenly felt an intense pain in my chest, but I ignored it. Because of my lack of sleep, I was unsteady on my legs. My body sent other signs asking for me to rest, but I didn't care. I staggered toward my fridge to search for something to eat.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Wanta. Thank you for buying this volume of *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. (You *did* buy it...right?!)

It's been around four years since I made my debut as an author, so most of the children that were in elementary school at the start must be in middle school now. Time sure flies, doesn't it? As for me, I'm writing this afterword while fighting with my brother in *Splatoon*. When I was a kid, I played games a lot, so I can't help but feel a little nostalgic.

Anyway, let's stop the personal talk here and get back to *Survival Strategies of a Corrupt Aristocrat*. This book is the result of me thinking "What would happen if a man who stopped trusting people reincarnated in a fangame full of betrayals and bad ending flags?" The advertising was as follows: "A territory on the verge of collapse, a monster assault, a hero who doesn't permit injustice—a world full of bad ending flags."

Reborn as Jack, our protagonist—who doesn't have any cheat ability—has to work diligently to overcome all the problems of his domain. Moreover, knowing that he's going to be betrayed by people close to him thanks to his game knowledge, he can't rely on anyone else. Looking at it like that, it seems like his life is going to be on hard mode, but I'm trying to not make the story too heavy or serious, and instead I'm writing in a way that people can enjoy reading about Jack being flustered by everything that's happening. So you don't need to worry(?) about that.

We should meet again in the next volume if this one sells well, so if you enjoyed it, it would really help me if you could spread the word!

Finally, I want to offer my thanks to everyone who participated in the publication of this book.

To Mr. Yunagi, the illustrator. When I saw Jack, I immediately thought "That's him!" He had exactly the kind of villain-y appearance I had imagined, and I'm really grateful for it. I've been deeply moved by Adele's cuteness and

Seravimia's mean looks too.

To Mr. K, the editor-in-chief, who has been a great help by correcting and giving suggestions to improve the script. We didn't have the opportunity to meet directly and only talked online, but I did watch the videos of Drecom Media Channel, so I know how he looks! I took a liking to the way he speaks a little monotone, to the point that I feel a little lonely if I don't hear his voice once a day. (A shame that he isn't a beautiful girl...) I'm eagerly awaiting the next video!